PREFACES TO

CONTEMPORARY ARABIC LITERATURE

(THE POST- MAHFOUZ ERA)

ESSAYS

BY

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WITH A MINIATURE ANTHOLOGY

OF MODERN ARABIC POETRY

SINCE THE 1970s

by

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CONTENTS

I. Introduction

It has been fashionable of late to re-tell the story of Arabic literature: numerous 'histories' have appeared, both in Arabic and in English, which claim to cover the entire stretch of Arabic literary history, though the recent tendency has been to concentrate on modern Arabic literature. The 'histories' have been, on the whole, disappointing: rather than providing the reader with fresh interpretations (as a story retold is necessarily a story re-interpreted), they repeat what the older generation has had to say about Arabic literature, and their critical frame of reference is generally too traditional. A more serious fault has been the insistence on regarding every work written in Arabic as belonging to a single body of literature, informed by the same spirit and reflecting the same reality. Without exception, critical histories of Arabic literature deal with ancient and modern texts as products of the same mind; worse still, they deal with the Arabic literature produced in one Arab country as an undifferentiated part of Arabic literature everywhere in the Arab world. The case for regarding language as a constant of prime importance is weighty enough, to be sure; and there are factors within each language that will support that argument, especially when the tradition of Arabic is so deeply implanted in the minds and souls of most Arabs.

However, just as it is difficult to speak in the same way of African works written in English and, say, of modern British novels, or to use the same critical approach in dealing with Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* and any of John Updike's novels, it is well-nigh impossible to speak in the same critical terms of Morocco's Barradah and Egypt's Taymour, though both have written in so-called 'classical' Arabic. There are differences imposed by the changing reality which make any attempt at generalization fatuous. A glaring example is the tendency to speak of Arabic drama as though it was an Arabic literary genre to be found in each Arab country and with a number of unifying characteristics; but Arabic drama is a genre mainly associated with Levantine-Egyptian theatrical history and cannot be studied except in terms of that history. It is a genre spoken of, theorized about and discussed at length but rarely practised outside Egypt and the Levant. It is difficult to talk of Arabic drama in any Arab country in the Gulf (with the possible exception of Iraq) because the theatre as we know it does not exist there. School or University productions, done occasionally in some of those countries, whether the cast is all-male or mixed, do not constitute a tradition and the texts are rarely published. The restrictions imposed on individual freedom, especially on women, in some countries make it difficult to accept the idea of dialogue, not to say the very concept of conflict, so essential to drama.

In North African Arab countries, apart from Egypt, the European heritage has been French; and the implications of such cultural modes have been only too obvious. One may speak of the Sudanese short story or the poetry of Hardillo (two Sudanese poets share that name – one writing in the vernacular, the other in classical Arabic) as belonging to Arabic literature: similarities with the output of the Arab East help identify features that secure a 'measure of identity', as it were. But it will not be easy to speak of the work of a Libyan poet, a Tunisian novelist, an Algerian short story writer or even a well-known

critic from Morocco, such as Al-Basheer Al-Qamari, as belonging to the mainstream of modern Arabic literature.

It is, indeed, the mainstream of modern Arabic literature that we have in mind when we speak of that literature in general. Tributaries will be found, no doubt, everywhere in the Arab world; but we must always have the mainstream full in view when we speak of it as such. Some of the literary output of say, Yemen, will be seen to have greater artistic merit than much of that of the mainstream: the poetry of Al-Muqalih must rank high enough on our list of contemporary Arabic poets; but his entire output will not in the final analysis belong to the mainstream. So will that of Ghazi Al-Qusaybi of Saudi Arabia; and so, in fact, will the work of many distinguished poets and novelists who have, for all their intrinsic merit, remained outside the mainstream.

The criterion I have used may be controversial, for I believe that what distinguishes the mainstream, apart from artistic merit, is relevance and, perhaps more importantly, influence and popularity. So Ahmad Shawqi, Hafiz Ibrahim, Tewfiq Al-Hakeem, Taha Hussein and Abbas Al-Aqqad (of Egypt) are mainstream writers; just as Bisharah Al-Khouri, Khalil Mutran, Elia Abu Madi, and Sati' Al-Husari (of Lebanon) are; and just as Nazik Al-Mala'ikah, Badr Shakir El-Sayyab and Abdul-Wahhab Al-Bayyati (of Iraq) are; and just as many others from other Arab countries. The late development of many countries in the Arab world may account for the predominance of writers of the Arab East; and, other facts being equal, the early interest in and evaluation of artistic genres borrowed from Europe and popularized by the press could have contributed to the establishment of what I have called the mainstream. The popularity of Nizar Qabbani's verse (a Syrian) has no doubt done harm to the reputation of a great many

poets in Syria and elsewhere who may possess greater artistic merit; but such is the case with literature: for the mainstream is not up to the critic alone to create. It was his popularity that led to a revival of the lyric, the love song, and the short incisive poem written today by major figures such as Farouq Guwaidah (in Egypt) and Soad El-Sabah (in Kuwait). In fact, it was this criterion that made us include El-Sabah's *Fragments of a Woman*, a volume of verse beautifully done into English by Nehad Selaiha, in the series *Contemporary Arabic Literature in Egypt.*

In Inception, the series had the specific objective of introducing the English reader to the literature of mainstream authors from the post-Naguib Mahfouz generation. The works published were varied enough to include most of the genres that came to be popular – the novel, the novella, the short story, the 'diary', the verse-play, the folkloric play, the regular realistic drama, the classic play, the 'volume' of verse (Diwan) and the anthology. We have worked hard over nearly a decade to fulfil that task and we have nearly 50 titles to our credit. The early titles are now out of print and the State Publishing House plans reissues in the near future. Variety has been maintained and many representative authors have been done into English for the first time.

This book includes some of the 'introductions' I have written for that series. There are two essays written for works published outside the series, namely the *Introduction* to Mustapha Mahmoud's *An Attempt at a Modern Reading of the Quran* and the *Introduction* to Izz-El-Din Ismail's *The Trial of an Unknown Man*. Both fit in with the other essays to constitute a general framework for a fresh view of Arabic literature in Egypt. To a certain extent, the re-interpretation has been guided by my interest in the cultural transformations both in

Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world: the so-called 'Islamic awakening' has been behind every recent change in direction, positively or negatively; just as the socialist upsurge in the 1960s had been the major factor in the evolution of Arabic drama in Egypt and the respectability gained today by verse written in the Egyptian dialect. Foreign influences are dealt with rather lightly, as a whole book has been published separately on the cultural and literary exchanges between Arabic and European literatures (*The Comparative Tone*, Cairo, 1994). I intend the two books to be complementary, though repetitions are, of course, unavoidable. Indeed, repetitions will be found to occur even in this book as the areas covered naturally overlap. I must apologize for this as well as for any commonplaces that had to be repeated on occasion. I appeal for the patience of the learned reader; and for more than patience in cases of divergence from the critical canon.

I must in this context express deep gratitude for Professor Farid's contribution to this volume -- an anthology of some of the verse produced in the last few years, which may be 'miniature' but is by no means minor. I must also acknowledge my debt to the bibliography of Arabic Literature in Translation prepared by Professor Angele Botros Samaan, of the Department of English, Cairo University, and published by the Ministry of Culture in Egypt. I owe her infinite gratitude for this work as well as for what she taught me over years of serious study in that Department. Of the major lessons taught are respect for scholarship, honesty in acknowledging one's debt, and a deep-seated feeling of belonging to a tradition. She has always commanded my generation's respect– and love.

M. Enani

Cairo, 1994.

The Novel Revolution

The Challenge to Realism:

Al-Ghitani's *Alley*

Unlike poetry, the Arabic novel is a fairly recent genre: for all its roots in our literary tradition, the modern European form it has come to acquire is definitely a twentieth-century product. Of its rise and development much has been written, and the reader will find it easy enough to obtain authoritative material, both scholarly and critical, on the subject. The fact that it has a well-studied, immediate frame of reference has tempted most scholars to apply solely Western concepts in their various approaches, making comparisons and drawing conclusions. A scholar often finds himself faced with an immense wealth of material, mostly foreign, even if he narrows down his perspective to a specific kind or a minor technical point; and the process of sifting through that material is further complicated by cultural differences which must be taken into account.

Of all literary genres the novel is the closest to the culture which gives it substance and, to a certain extent, form. To ignore this fact is to run the risk of drawing false conclusions. Furthermore, we have been inured to certain concepts in novel criticism which relate every work to nineteenth-century European forms, so that any technical

innovation is judged against the established standards of the "masters". Joyce's *Ulysses*, no less than Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, would be seen against the background of Tolstoy and Dickens; and the deviation from "established form" in the works of, say, Durrell or Fowles, could only be assessed with reference to Conrad and Lawrence. This is hardly a faultless approach, for a major novelist is major not only on account of his form but often, as David Daiches has argued, because of his "range" and "influence" as well. Such is the vitality of the novel form, in fact, that no final criteria have been developed for it; and such is the importance of relevance as a critical concept that the "imperfections" of the major figures are dwarfed by the vital relationship their novels have with "life" whether we choose to define it in parochial social terms or to widen our perspective to make it embrace the great variety of cultural modes which man has evolved down the centuries.

It was this, I believe, that had set Naguib Mahfouz apart from the rest of the field, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s; and it was again the "range" and the impact of Gamal el-Ghitani that gave him his distinctive position in the 1970s. By getting to grips with the realities of Egyptian life during the great upheavals of the inter-war period, Mahfouz came to occupy a position comparable to that held by the "masters" in Europe, gradually forcing his "standards of form" on Arabic fiction. He continued to develop, no doubt, experimenting with new forms easily related to "modernist" forms abroad, but it is rather for his range and influence that he retains his unique position. The generations that followed have often found it difficult to escape that influence, and their early work shows, almost in every case, that they came out of his "coat": the most popular novel form in Arabic, the

realist- naturalist novel with symbolic undertones, for the perfection of which he has full credit, has developed in the hands of contemporary writers into a variety of genres – the symbolist-realist, the impressionist-psychological, and the poetic-realist – reflecting the new literary trends in Arabic fiction. The brief analysis of *Incidents in Za'frani Alley* should help to throw light on one of the major trends in the Arabic novel in the post-Mahfouz era.

At the outset, however, we must distinguish between two main categories of novelists (and short-story writers) in Egypt today: the first are the "story-tellers" who share the seminal ability to arouse and maintain the reader's interest, to entertain him occasionally and, above all, to use a language adapted from classical Arabic to journalistic use. Understandably, most members of this category are either journalists by profession, or professionals (physicians, lawyers etc.) turned journalist. Some of them belong to the generation of Naguib Mahfouz and, consequently, continue to use the classical Arabic of the "pioneers" (or the "revivalists" of the early 20th century) which seems to battle against the dominant linguistic modes of the media, with little success. For all their technical differences (some can do more than spin a yarn and some are bold enough to experiment with fresh novel forms) they are limited in range, often the prisoners of classical rhetoric. The majority are "limited" because they have to appeal to large audiences whose modes of thought and emotional responses necessarily lack the sophistication of the modernists. A good number of these are women writers who concentrate on the eternal "dialectic" of love, but their approach is too direct, occasionally simplistic, often superficial. Exceptions are rare: those who pay less attention to plot, characterization etc. tend to feign a "poetic" style which invariably

falls flat; and most of the women idealize themselves as representing eternal woman, to the point of antagonizing the most feminist reader.

The second category includes the "literary" novelists who aspire to international standards and thus adopt the European form and manipulate Arabic to make it a fit vehicle for their modern techniques. As I have said, these are represented in the series* with the stress on variety, especially as they have succeeded in individualizing themselves (in both form and content). A general feature of this category is the tendency to relate the characters to their immediate social milieu, with the accent on the subtle correspondence between psychological and social ills, and an emergent, especially adapted language which is neither "literary" in a pejorative sense (that is, dependent on conventional Arabic rhetoric) nor totally colloquial. It is to this category that Ghitani belongs, and his excellence is due to innovation in almost all features of the novel.

In his recent work he shows a marked tendency to develop an independent idiom: he uses Arab, particularly Egyptian, history, in forging new images, new linguistic structures which are equally evocative of the past and the present, so that the reader is made conscious at once of the continuity and the difference between past and present. Unfortunately this aspect of his work is never adequately represented in translation. In *Incidents in Za'frani Alley* he uses the language of the media, with colloquialisms which bring alive the mood of the Alley, but instead of the ancient linguistic formulas (which in Arabic are never quite obsolete) he uses the setting to recreate a feeling of old Cairo that is fast disappearing. The setting

* i.e. Contemporary Arabic Literature .

helps him, too, to create the claustrophobic atmosphere which dominates the characters at many levels – the economic, the social and, most significantly, the psychological.

As a phantasia, the book is bold enough to use the realistic framework of the "established" novel so as to break it consistently from within: the reader discovers the direction of the symbolic action gradually as the initial "dramatic" situation gathers force and the incidents lead to their inevitable conclusion. And, as in "Modernist" writing, man here is a lonely creature, a prisoner of himself, even though the Alley appears to be a well-knit community. In fact, the more the interest the people of Za'frani show in each other, as the scenes of their interminable quarrels amply illustrate, the deeper is their sense of isolation. This paradox is dextrously used as an integral part of an ironic situation which builds up quietly but most decisively. As the communication channels open and gain in strength with the unifying power of the spell cast on the Alley, disintegration sets in and the sense of isolation which had lurked menacingly beneath the surface becomes a devastating force. The irony is further reinforced by the figure of the Sheikh – an ugly-looking creature and a cripple – placed in a triangular room without windows, but wielding godlike powers, the most significant of which being his ability to suspend procreation.

I have used the word "procreation" deliberately; for the suspension of human reproduction by making Za'frani men impotent is only one aspect of his evil power. Another is his ability to enslave the entire population of the Alley, forcing them to lead a communal life, to wake up and sleep at the same time, to have their meals at the same time (and eat the same kinds of food), and thus to deprive them

of "choice", of free will and individuality, and, symbolically, of life itself. The sense of doom which the Sheikh brings to the Alley is not unconnected with the material existence of the characters, their earlier deprivations and frustrations, but the fact that the Sheikh now plays the role of God, making his presence felt at the deepest and most personal level in the life of the people, gives him a definite allegorical significance. The phantasia is therefore designed to be allegorical, as will be explained in the course of the following discussion of the technical aspects of the novel.

Incidents in Za'frani Alley is unique in Arabic because of this very feature. Its epic proportions and structure reveal an "anti-epic" within: rather than the glories of a nation sung by the epic poet of old, we now have the ignominious behaviour of anti-heroes casting an awful shadow on the group (or the community) in the Alley so that, pathetic as they often tend to seem, their actions are downright contemptible. Can anything be more ironic than to have Takarli - a pimp who hires his wife to all and sundry - cast in the role of a "revolutionary"? I have found it a painful irony that Takarli, who is utterly despicable, (not only on account of this) should rise against the Sheikh and declare himself a rational, righteous rebel, calling for the use of reason and unwilling to accept the obfuscation of the Sheikh's message. Variations of such an anti-hero abound at a variety of levels so that the point of attack continually changes, though the allegorical terms remain more or less constant, perhaps thanks to Ghitani's scathing sense of humour – which leads us to the specific meaning I have attached to allegory.

Early enough in the novel an atmosphere is created containing the terms into which all human actions and physical incidents are

allegorically translated, so that the reader must interpret for himself the meaning (or meanings) of each, even as they seem to shift within the intricate web of cross-references and correspondences. Orwellian in conception, the novel invites an added effort of the will for the "willing suspension of disbelief" to be possible - which, as Coleridge reminds us, "constitutes poetic faith". But then this is neither Orwell nor Tolkien: the allegory is neither pure (as in, say, *Animal Farm* or *The Lord of the Rings*) nor couched in the poetical verbiage of the imitators of Spenser's *The Fairy Queen* : it is a "dark conceit" which requires the acceptance of the human condition as the central predicament, much as Philip Larkin does in his verse. In fact, before the end of File 1 (i. e. Chapter 1), such a mood is established and the unusual terms of the action come to be accepted without questioning. As the reader is sucked in, with the recognition that the residents in Za'frani Alley are united by more than the location, he realizes that their psychological impotence (inseparable from their physical conditions) is translated into sexual impotence. It is not poverty alone that is blamed for their plight; for other aspects of Cairene life in the period spanned by the novel (almost two decades) emerge to account for the impotence, and each individual case of frustration, though peculiar to the character concerned, presents a new facet of the common plight, owing to the realistic, often naturalistic, handling of these "cases". We accept the impotence as real – and the fresh technique assures us that it is only too real.

The novelty of Ghitani's technique is, in fact, worthy of detailed discussion. First of all, the method of narration relies on "repeated attacks", as identified in the poetry of the modernists by G. Hartman, but often confused with the musical structure of "repetition with

variation". The story of a character is not given to us at once – not at any part of the novel – but is told and retold at intervals with certain additions, which makes the method closer to that of "incremental repetition". By the "story" I do not refer, of course, to what "happens" to a given character in Za'frani Alley; for the "happenings" are embedded in the situation which has all the qualities of good drama, unfolding as it does in stages and with the inevitability and vehemence of every taut dramatic structure. Indeed, the "action" often appears "cyclical" rather that linear, eddying like a whirlpool wherein the characters sink to their doom. What I have in mind is, rather, that the image of each character is built up in successive stages from fragments of the past, snippets of a shifting present and the shadows of a terrible future. Even when a definite development occurs which seems to change that image dramatically, as in the case of Hasan Anwar, there remains a more or less constant "core": a poetic vision of a type of character that is common enough in Egyptian life. Sometimes, as in the case of Uwais, the fragments from his past are given initially in one "dose" (in his "confession" to the Sheikh); only to lead to the blind alley of the present where nothing holds any promise of change. The prosaic sanity of Uwais contrasts most effectively with the poetic insanity of Sergeant Sallam, another "First Herald", whose delusions of grandeur represent a variation on the theme of the persistent dream world to which most characters escape.

In Hasan Anwar's case, the pressures of his present are given initially in snippets from real life, but magnified in subsequent reports into his nightmarish illusions, while the shadows of an impossible future – the dreams of Rummana the "leftist", of Tahun and Daturi – hang down like a low sky with no promise of rain. Abu-Ghait has

another dream of his hometown, a rural life which is again magnified to provide an idyllic world to which he could on occasion resort – an escape route to an equally impossible past.

Sometimes, a dream turns sour when, as in the case of Bannan and his wife, a character is forced to abandon it: the Bannans finally hope that they may never see their son again, that he may never come back to Za'frani Alley after the spell, and the irony here is painful. Sitt Buthayna becomes faced with the gaping hollow of death, as though the meaning of the spell had been clearer to her than to the rest of the women who either continue to be prisoners of the dim horrible drabness of the present (Umm Abdu, Rawd, etc.) or run away. An exception is the Sybil-like figure, hovering between life and death, of Ras al-Figla's mother: she sits symbolically at the entrance to her son's warehouse – a dark, underground, secret place where he finally disappears – almost like the rock into which it is said her son had been transformed.

The method of "repeated attacks" helps Ghitani to sift through his material carefully: the hordes of names encountered in the first chapter (File 1) leave behind only the original impressions they had made which, in the later attacks, merge into those of the central characters to embody the Za'frani spirit. It also helps him to reveal the underlying psychological patterns which change but little from one situation to another, so that the mood is continually re-introduced with only those modifications needed to preserve a character's individuality.

Another aspect of Ghitani's stylistic novelty is his use of the poetic technique of building up impressions cumulatively -- a technique often described in terms of painting. "Pictures" from life in Za'frani Alley are introduced successively, sometimes to "modify"

one another but essentially to build up "impressionistic" images in the final chapter of the work. The details in the early "pictures" are realistic -- perhaps too realistic -- and the impressions they make are comparable to the swift shifting ballad similes of the broadsides: they are direct, straightforward and easy enough to grasp, but they create an overpowering sense of reality. The reader is soon overwhelmed by the power of that reality to the extent that the zigzagging narrative method gradually ceases to matter, and he becomes more interested in the "situation" as consisting of impressions.

The modern reader does not, of course, expect a traditional narrative where the writer simply tells the reader "what is happening"; and no reader should expect Ghitani to carry the histories of individual characters beyond the point they had reached at the end of File 2. All subsequent developments, both horizontally, as the spell becomes known to the outside world and the ripples widen, and vertically, in terms of the psychological analysis of each character, are more dramatic than narrative. The emerging situation relies entirely on impressions which in the second half of the novel cross and enrich one another. They are sometimes dovetailed, sometimes given successively, but, most importantly, voices from the outside world assure us that what we have here is a damned world, deprived of all hope of salvation, doomed to disintegration though united by a pattern of "living" which is repeated only with slight variations from one character to another. That he could capture that pattern and present it with such vigour is evidence of Ghitani's consummate skill, for it is that pattern that unites both "form" and "content".

The "pattern" is merely suggested, in fact, by the realistic details in the early chapters of the novel: only towards the end, when the predicament has assumed its full proportions, do we realize what has

been at work all along and are thus able to perceive that "pattern". Whatever the reasons given for the frustration of the central characters, the static life in the alley (a blind alley, a cul-de-sac comparable to the London Mews) gives birth to a world of illusions which is tantamount to an alternative world -- not unreal except in the sense of lacking material existence, but otherwise very real indeed. As has been mentioned, the symbolic position of the Sheikh points in the direction of that "unseen" world, so that early enough in the novel, as Uwais toys with his dream of buying a hand-cart and as Daturi contemplates the prospective residents of his impossible (symbolic) building of the future, the reader is introduced to that realm of illusion underlying the real world. The recurrence of that realm constitutes a pattern -- at a variety of levels, one of which, strangely enough, is the real-life one. Ras al-Figla's marriage to Garida is seen as *real*, in so far as it happens in real life, but the marriage episode, threading the entire novel, is nightmarish in quality and must be seen in the final analysis as not quite real. This reading is corroborated by the "fantastic" portrayal of Ras al-Figla himself, an ugly midget, with a line of spittle on one side of his mouth, and bizarre tastes, and the fact that his warehouse is endowed with shades of the underworld. The same applies to the public bath espisode where Uwais spends some time giving the "nice, white, smooth-fleshed gentlemen" sexual pleasure: the traditional association of water with washing away one's sins (especially Islamic ablution and purity) are reversed, and the night life of the bath becomes a "sinful" nightmare. But it is the illusory world of Hasan Anwar that combines the two levels, and is worthy of separate consideration.

From the beginning, the "alternative" world of Hasan Anwar is presented obliquely as an interest in war. His passion for reports of military exploits and the biographies of warlike geniuses is not

revealed like Tahun's dream of the tunnels or Ali's faith in the Indian "solution", but is suppressed until it becomes real enough for him at the deepest psychological level. At that level it becomes not a dream but a "world view". His military campaign as a German General, and eventual surrender, are real also because they are painfully *real* in the *real* world. His ambitions are doomed from the start and his life at work. a failure.The secret world into which he withdraws by degrees had to be Hitlerite because his old dream of a German victory during the war was associated with his dream of self-fulfilment -- a dream too cherished to be abandoned easily. Defeat in real life begets a sense of desperation "balanced" by a mild form of paranoia, which develops until the man does go over the edge. So, while the conflict between reality and illusion (or rather, as I have argued, their correspondence) spells out the end, comically but pathetically in Anwar's case, the dividing line between them actually disappears in the case of other characters who apparently remain "normal" but are no less comical and pathetic. Anwar's predicament is not unusual in world literature (the closest example is to be found in Chekhov – in *Ward No.6* for instance) but the real novelty is that his situation is associated here with that of the other characters at the various levels of intersection between reality and illusion.

Take Anwar's immediate family: Samir disappears and is obviously one of Anwar's hopes gone west. He prefers the sordid reality of the public bath (as related by Uwais) and the company of "disreputable" persons (of one who bears the ironic name of Mahdi, as reported by Daturi) to life at home, which is no less sordid. His rebellion against the Sheikh and the Za'frani way of life is therefore ironic: we know that he is doomed and that no one could really escape. The fact that it is his departure that deals the final blow to Anwar is, therefore, equally ironic, for the father is lamenting the

passing away of a hope that was totally unfounded. Hence the significance of the greeting imposed by the Sheikh on the Za'franis – "Now is the time of flight!" – insofar as it connects the theme of "flight" with that of despair, a combination which has many variations in the novel.

Thematically, Hasan Anwar's "fall" is a development of Sergeant Sallam's "life in the past", just as Samir's disappearance is a variation of the "flight" of Bannan's son. Until the penultimate stage in the Bannan's "development", as I have said, that mysterious émigré remains a floating hope, sailing around the world on board foreign ships, sending reassuring "messages" about the existence of another world (presumably healthy, normal and sane), while Samir maintains a grim presence in the Alley as a spectre of the past – a ghost that would not be laid (his father actually sees, or thinks he sees him).

Throughout the novel, the use of illusion emerges as the central technical device -- hardly a new one, and one could cite Chekhov again or even Virginia Woolf. But Ghitani differs in employing it to evolve his unique sense of humour. I have always felt that his sense of humour is firmly established in the Egyptian folk tradition and that, for all the links it has with European humour, its peculiar flavour could be easily recognized. It certainly has affinities with English humour in particular (the use of overstatement, understatement, the incongruous, burlesque, and grotesque) but it differs in relying primarily on the flights of fantasy which assume horrific proportions in the context of Za'frani life. Fantasy can, of course, be a healthy psychological activity and is commonly used by artists; but when it becomes a "way of thinking" – almost a way of life – one must assume that all is not well with the fantasizing mind. The author takes

his departure from the tendency of the Egyptian mind to modify reality with "colours of the imagination", and, in extreme cases, to change his vision of reality, almost completely, not on the basis of material facts, but solely through illusion. By this I do not mean the superstitions, the world of spirits and demons which are the common property of mankind but, rather, the fantastic bent of mind which has its roots in the Egyptian tradition. A typical attitude to any report is neither one of complete credulity nor one of utter disbelief: a listener may hesitate to accept it at first but, having accepted it in substance, he must immediately "work on it" to make it fit in with his preconceptions, normally proceeding to add further dimensions to it from his private fantasies before transmitting it to others. The process of oral transmission helps to blow up or stunt the report so that by the time it becomes common knowledge it will have lost an essential part of its factual basis. What happens in Za'frani is that the characters have divergent visions of reality, fed by their private fantasies; and until the Alley is "bespelled" these remain, in a very real sense, private.

Now through the revelations of the Sheikh, the characters can no longer project those fantasies which have for long appeared inviolable: their innermost dreams, desires and thoughts now clash with a harsh reality, a ruthless situation which forces them to face themselves. The recurrent "quarrels" in the Alley have been a "healthy" means of coming to terms with reality: they exchanged accusations, hurled abuse at one another (with the typical Egyptian slanging match a favourite form) in the confidence that they can retreat to their private world to bask in the warmth of fantasy. The Sheikh's injunction that there should be no more quarrels almost

deprives Sitt Buthayna of her *raison d'être* ; while the entanglement of Ustaz Atif, the university graduate, in the affairs of the other Za'franis shatters his private world and compels him to face his own inadequacy. The destruction of privacy spells the end of fantasy, and with it the psychological balance of all hitherto seemingly healthy Za'franis.

This kind of conflict is undoubtedly tragic, and, as it turns out, the novel ends tragically: but there are comic aspects of the conflict which are no less comic because they are grave. It is an essential quality of Ghitani's genius that the painfully tragic can also be, even more painfully, comic. As early as section(ii) of Chapter 1 (File 1) one is faced with absurdities that are grotesque enough to arouse laughter and morbid enough to spell impending disaster. The description of Ras al-Figla's warehouse in section (iii) is equally fantastic and ludicrous; but the marriage episode, related with the characteristic Ghitani lightness of tone, is real enough. The rendering of the early days of marriage is comic, but we know that it is a situation fraught with danger and potentially catastrophic. The same applies to the life of Hasan Anwar in the government office where he works, to Sitt Buthayna's actions, to Qarqar the musician, etc. When the author resorts to irony, as he does in handling the Takarlis, the grimness of the subject precludes the possibility of comedy.



The Common Man
Wooed And Spurned

(i) The Common Man Wooed:

Yusuf Idris' *Language of Pain*

Yusuf Idris has been acclaimed as the greatest short story writer in the Arab World: no-one else writing today, not even the 1988 Nobel Prize winner Naguib Mahfouz, could rival his inimitable style and technique. However, for all the laurels heaped on him, the eminent status he enjoys both at home and abroad, and the innumerable critical works written on him, he remains largely untranslated. I have two collections, *The Cheapest Nights*, done into English by Wadida Wassef, Heinemann, London, 1978, and *Rings of Burnished Brass,* by Catherine Cobham, Heinemann, London, 1984, and have heard of a third. These can hardly do justice to such a prolific and influential writer.

A master of the short story, Yusuf Idris has written novels, plays and articles for the press which rank among the finest in our modern tradition; and all are worthy of reaching the vaster English reading public. For Yusuf Idris is not merely a writer of fiction, nor is he merely a columnist of rare ability; he is a major influence on modern Egyptian thought, both as part of the modernist trend which has been gaining momentum since the end of World War II, and as part of the 'neo-enlightenment' that transformed our thinking about politics, social life and even religious practice in the 1950s and 1960s. His

relevance as an intellectual leader, rather than simply as a leading literary figure, is being increasingly recognized by the rising generation. His words are devoured in whatever form he chooses for them: even when adlibbing on television, the radio or at public meetings, Yusuf Idris manages to draw everybody's attention and exercise an undeniable influence.

However, it was as a literary figure that Ysuf Idris emerged in the 1950s, in a world still recovering from the traumatic experiences of World War II, in a country fighting to re-establish its identity as the cradle of one of the oldest civilizations on earth. A physician by training, he soon espoused the "liberation cause' and made use of his experience in getting to know the real mettle of the Egyptian character. Beneath the social 'illnesses' and the chronic political malaise, he recognized a genius that needed to be re-discovered.

The simplest manifestation of the Egyptian genius was, he concluded, its capacity for survival; and the enemy it had for long fought was oppression. That the Egyptians could maintain their quintessential ethos for such a long time, despite imponderable challenges down centuries of oppression was proof enough for Idris of the resilience of the Egyptian character which he attributed to cultural roots implanted deep in the soil of Egypt itself. Armed with this faith in his people, he launched his attacks on the disease of our time, namely colonialism, which distorted the real character of a given nation by transferring to it features of an alien life. The contradictions resulting from such 'transference' were not insuperable, though they could not be completely overcome unless a deliberate effort was made to restore people's self-confidence and liberate their minds from the legacy of centuries of 'obfuscation', to use Lawrence's term. The

struggle for liberation was not merely physical; it was also psychological and intellectual. Hence, Yusuf Idris' belief in what I have called a 'neo-enlightenment', that is, a modernist movement whose ultimate goal is to achieve liberation at all possible levels.

The road he took was not, however, direct. One has to plough through his entire literary output and the heaps of critical material available (a near-exhaustive bibliography of which is appended to P. M. Kurpershoek's *The Short Stories of Yusuf Idris*, Leiden, 1981) to realize the difference between the direct approach adopted by the 'pioneers' -- Lutfi El-Sayyid, Taha Hussein and Lewis Awad – and the zigzagging route taken by Idris. Their approach was purely intellectual, relying on facts of history and academic research, while his was 'artistic', relying on vision emerging in moments of, or akin to, revelation. Lutfi El-Sayyid was a philosopher, Taha Hussein a literary historian, Lewis Awad a scholar equipped with that critical insight which only writers of genius possess; but Yusuf Idris was (still is) an artist trusting in his intuition and speaking with the voice of the ordinary Egyptian, the common man with whom he always identified. At the time he started writing his short stories no-one else could del so deeply into the character of the common man. Yusuf El-Siba'i, Ihsan Abdul-Quddus, Tewfiq El-Hakeem, Amin Yusuf Ghurab, Muhammad Abdul-Haleem Abdullah, Yusuf Gohar, Abdul-Rahman El-Sharqawi, even the redoubtable Naguib Mahfouz himself, to mention some of the prominent, all contributed to the 'realistic' school that took shape in post-war Egyptian literature; but Yusuf Idris's common man spoke loudest and his tones were more genuine and distinct.

Yusuf Idris had, no doubt, one or two predecessors who had made that discovery earlier in the century and helped to create the right atmosphere for his work to be well received and appreciated, but the summit remained to be conquered by Idris in the 1950s and 1960s. If we are to single out a quality that should set him apart from those stars of the first magnitude, it would be, no doubt, his infinite sympathy with the 'natural constitution', to use Thomas Jefferson's expression, of the common man. Never is Yusuf Idris condescending: in the common man he found all that he looked for in humanity. He admired his strength and loved his weakness. Above all, he respected him: and respect has meant that the common man in him is fit for any kind of artistic treatment. He is sometimes elevated to the level of tragic hero, sometimes satirized as a victim of oppression who does not do enough to resist it (even though he survives it) or is simply dealt with 'realistically' as the Everyman of today's world.

The rise of the common man in Idris may provide a key to our understanding of his art; but it is not enough. In the theatre, the common man gained unprecedented eminence at about the same time: the first wave of Egyptian dramatists were largely 'realistic' and had their source of inspiration directly from common life. Nu'man 'Ashour, Lutfi El-Khouli, Sa'd El-Din Wahba, Mahmoud Diab and Mikhail Rouman used his language and focused on his preoccupations; others, whether using his language or a variety of Arabic adapted from that language, used the common man only as a vehicle for their own dramatic themes. Those who went to history for their themes, using verse or prose, classical or Egyptian Arabic, could not care much about the common man. As I have mentioned elsewhere, (cf. my 'Introduction' to the English translation of

Wahba's *Mosquito Bridge*, State Publishing House, Cairo, 1987), the common man was 'in the air' and Yusuf Idris, in his fiction and drama, was decidedly part of a general trend.

There is, however, much more to Idris's ordinary man than realistic portrayal. In his short stories he uses not the language of conversation used in the theatre, nor indeed the modern prose style invented for fiction by the pioneers, but a language that is both a natural reflection of his characters' thought processes and a reformulation of those processes. True, he uses modern classical Arabic, which I have elsewhere called Modern Standard Arabic* but it is not the language that has been accepted as truly 'standard', such as the uniform language used in science, the media, or in the literature of the mid-twentieth century. His modern classical Arabic is largely adapted from Egyptian Arabic, the language of thought, feeling and conversation in Egypt, variously described as 'colloquial', which is a misnomer, or as the 'vernacular', which is inaccurate. Rather than use a 'third' language, to use the term introduced by Tewfiq El-Hakeem to describe a linguistic level that stands midway between classical and Egyptian Arabic (but which, in fact, refers to an easy-to-understand variety of Modern Standard Arabic) Yusuf Idris uses classical Arabic, at all possible levels, as a living medium. Perhaps for the first time in the history of our language, tone is used as a means of intensification -- a modern concept in Arabic, though quite familiar to the English reader. It is important, however, to refer to it when introducing short stories in translation as this feature is most likely to suffer in the rendering though, I believe, the English text of professor Nawal Naguib fairly preserves it.

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* Cf. M. Enani, 'Novel Rhetoric', *in Naguib Mahfouz: Nobel 1988, a collection of critical essays*, GEBO, Cairo, 1989, p, 97. et seq.

The style of Yusuf Idris is in fact unique. It is so sensitive to the slightest change in mood, and suggestive of it, that the reader is often too absorbed in the work to notice it. It is most powerful and assertive when least 'visible', most unusual when most 'familiar'. The English reader will feel, I am sure, that whatever the 'subject', the setting or treatment, the Idrisian short story is taut in form – a quality that may be attributed to his style, to concentration which accounts for the inevitability of inner structure. That a writer could produce such 'intensive' documents of human experience is rare indeed, and Yusuf Idris will always be noted for the 'intensity' of his work.*

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* Yusuf Idris died in 1991.

(ii) The Common Man Spurned:

Abdul-Rahman Fahmi's *Tears of a Nobody*

Abdul Rahman Fahmi belongs to the second generation of "modernist" writers who tried, more or less successfully, to maintain the tradition of the "revivalists" – the prose-writers of the inter-war period who started, however, as early as 1910.

The "Literary Society" formed in the 1950s, of which Fahmi was a prominent member, had evolved an eclectic literary "theory" combining "innovation" with "traditionalism", that is to say, combining tendencies partly European, partly individual, with basic respect for the tradition of Arabic classics. As far as I know, no independent study has been made of that "theory" though it has had a considerable influence on the development of Arabic letters in the last thirty years or so. The reason may be its very "eclecticism" – the fact that it does not lend itself to easy classification in the way the "Diwan" does. The student has no difficulty in relating the "Diwan" theory to English romanticism – if only because of the direct Coleridgian echoes in, say Al-Aqqad – or in recognizing the links between the work of the "Apollo Group" and Shelley or Wordsworth. But the work of the "Literary Society" presents us with problems of classification: Shukri Ayad, a short-story writer-cum-scholar, Abdul

Ghaffar Makkawi, a philosopher-cum-playwright, and Salah Abdul-Saboor, a modernist poet, belonged to the Society; Farouq Khourshid, a Hazlitt-like figure, and a "folklore" specialist, was one of its pillars; Hussein Nassar, a classical Arabist, Abdul Rahman Fahmi, the radio-dramatist and story-teller, Ahmad Kamal Zaki and Izz-El-Din Ismail, (modernist critics and creative writers) were eminent members. But at the heart of the variety, there was a central preoccupation – namely, the revival of written Arabic as the medium of literary prose. And it is this feature of their work that requires a little investigation.

World War II has proved a convenient historical boundary, though not entirely arbitrary, in tracing the development of the arts. Just as the world changed after that War physically – that is, politically, economically and socially – the direction of literary art changed, though not so drastically in the beginning. Egypt, as the most sensitive to this change among the Arab states, was approaching the end of the long-drawn-out soul-searching process which culminated in the 1952 "revolution", and the sharp sense of national identity, combined with the old sense of belonging in Arab tradition (born as early as the 1900s) was now driving the major literary figures to question the character of Egyptian culture. Certain questions became pertinent: Do we belong more to Arab, ancient Egyptian or to mediterranean culture? Does the "modernization" process, started as early as the mid-nineteenth century, necessarily entail "Europeanization"? If Arabic literature should keep abreast of the "progress" achieved in the other walks of life, should it not adjust some of its "orientations", particularly conventional "rhetoric" and the "forms" inherited with the language from our rich tradition? And,

finally, how can the artist be truly "relevant" (a concept popularized in the early heady days of Socialism) while being original and genuine?

As most members of the Society were Arabic graduates, with some already advanced in Arabic scholarship, most of the answers to these questions were coloured by their central preoccupation with literary prose, (Abdul-Saboor and Ismail being no exception) the literary "forms" which the Society has credit for have been mainly in prose; and theirs has been no mean achievement. The pioneers, Al-Hakeem, Teymour, Moussa, Al-Aqqad, Heykal, Hussein, Al-Mazni, and Shukri had all contributed to the evolution of fresh Arabic prose – "usable" enough in the new literary genres, from the novel to the critical essay – but though they had their individual styles, they smacked too much of the classical formulae. True, they all contributed to the press and had to adapt their formulae to the new language, yet inchoate, of current affairs reporting; but in their books the rhythm of classical Arabic was predominant: a comparison of Hussein's prose (or Teymour's) with present-day (say Yusuf Idris's Arabic) will amply show the difference. Al-Hakeem was a special case, in so far as he had to adapt his classical formulae to the dramatic dialogue; and Salamah Moussa was a rebel in so far as his crusade was aimed at doing away altogether with the classical formulae and initiating what he called a "telegraphic" style. But the general trend was classicist and it established the conventions within which Mahfouz and his school flourished. A change was needed, and it could not come from the quarters of the foreign educated elite, the Awad-Mandour-Rushdi axis – a strange axis, considering their constant quarrels – but from the Arabic experts who could not be accused of lacking classical training. Strange as it may seem, members

of this Society had better knowledge of foreign literature than many English or French graduates, and many of them were excellent translators, but the firm roots they had in our indigenous culture saved them from any such facile accusations. Farouq Khourshid, with whom I worked for a while at the Egyptian Broadcasting Service, was willing to sacrifice some of the long hallowed rules of Arabic structure for literary elegance – and for effect. I clearly remember a conversation we had in November 1959 over the wording of a sentence in a commentary when he displayed a rare flexibility by accepting a genitival structure unusual in Arabic but easy to grasp and quite effective.

Izz-El-Din Ismail, whose *Trial of an Unknown Man* I did into English a couple of years ago, has proved to be most flexible of all: as editor of *Fusul*, he accepts articles using Arabic expressions simply unheard of (undreamt of) in our classical tradition, and often coins new words. Shukri Ayad, who taught me translation at the university, has been bold enough to use colloquial words in his short stories, as early as 1957, even while aiming in his translations of T. S. Eliot at what he called "solidity of expression", and Abdul Rahman Fahmi, who rose to fame in the early 1960s after winning a State Award for his *All for Freedom,* could easily turn his hand to radio drama totally in the colloquial!

The work of the Literary Society is characterized, as I have mentioned, by variety (as each member went his own way) and the eclectic literary theory led to the total assimilation of most modern literary genres into Arabic and the incessant mixing of these genres. The old barriers between, say, the story and the play, or between the lyrical poem and the folk-tale, or even more challenging, between the

philosophical essay and any of the established "art forms" have been pulled down and a good deal of *experimental* work was written (Cf. Makkawi's plays, Ayad's stories or Ismail's verse).

It may be too early to assess the real achievement of the Society, especially since the "founders" are, with the exception of Abdul-Saboor, alive, but one thing is certain: thanks to their sustained and conscious work on language, a new brand of literary prose has been born, and it has been flexible enough to accommodate both traditional and experimental forms. *The Tears of a Nobody* is a good example of the way in which a dramatist makes use of dramatic technique, especially that of "radio-drama", in turning a typical short-story situation into a novella proper. I have chosen this term deliberately because the "story" hinges on "an event which is unheard of but has taken place", to cite Goethe's definition. The unexpected turning point (*Wendepunkt*) ensures that the "conclusion surprises us even while it is a logical outcome" -- as Cuddon insists -- and this is primarily a dramatic technique.

The Tears of a Nobody owes its freshness, I believe, not only to its originality, but also to the deep roots which this literaray genre has in Arabic literature. The *Decameron*, as has been convincingly argued, owes a good deal to the romances of the age, prominent among which was *The Arabian Nights,* and even earlier sixteenth-century collections of *Novellion* (Guaradati's, 1467) also reveal such oriental influence. Both the *Maqamat* of the 9th-10th centuries, written in classical Arabic, and the folk-tales later included in the *Arabian Nights,* are characterized by the same technique identified by the Germans from Goethe to Herman Hesse. Al-Hamadhani's *Al-Maqamah Al- Bishriyyah,* to focus on one only, tells of the exploits

of an ordinary man who, needing to prove himself to his "lady" confronts a lion, no less, and kills it! In each of Al-Hamadhani's and Al-Hariri's *Maqamat* there is a concrete symbol which functions as a central point of attraction in the tale: here, too, the body of the dead woman – initially played down by Fahmi – looms large at the end as a symbol of a dead moment in the consciousness of the "hero" who thus finds himself truly a nobody, that is, not on account of his insignificant social position, but because of his failure to live up to his own ideals.

The story is, therefore, closer to a modern tragedy in prose than to a short story. Othman, the central character, is supposed to be a hero: he is the ordinary man generally endued with disproportionate greatness in the literature of the 1960s in Egypt, in line with the prevalent "socialist" traditions. We expect him to behave as a hero, and the author encourages this expectation by creating a "collective" hero from the individual common people in the poor district of Cairo where he lives. But then we are not in the 1960s, and no facile confrontation between rich and poor takes place: on the contrary, Othman easily succumbs to the show of power, the show of greatness, in Abdul-Rehim Bey's palace – and for a while he is drugged by that show . The "drugging" may be interpreted as the "tragic flaw" in an otherwise flawless character, but this is hardly so: for in that state of surrender to the magnificence of the Bey's life, Othman reveals a profound and quite genuine yearning for the power he has been deprived of all his life. We discover, even if he does not, that his experience at the palace is more than a fleeting moment in his consciousness: from within comes an acceptance of the glory of the Bey, and, what is really disastrous for his own self-image, a condoning of his relative's behaviour. The internal wallowing in the show of power (owing to his mingling with the mighty) brings him

closer to the Bey, so that his failure to shed any tears over the death of his wife becomes understandable. And it is this that makes the ending ambivalent: Othman does cry in the end, but his tears are not only those of a man who has woken up to the "treachery" he has committed, but also those of a man who has been forced to acknowledge that he is a nobody after all.

The ambivalence carries with it an unmistakable complexity and an underlying ironic tone: for here we have a truly modern novella where the "unexpected" is easily acceptable because of the "modern" image of human nature presented. Man no longer enjoys the idealization of pre-modernist literature, nor, in fact, the romanticism of our Arabic literary tradition: with his feet firmly on the ground, Abdul-Rahman Fahmi departs from the whole tradition of the preceding generation in focussing on the weakness that is central rather than incidental to human nature. Even the common man in him is not redeemed: the show of "solidarity in adversity" by the neighbours comes to nothing as the political slogans die out in the quiet of the evening, and as we realize that no positive action could ensue from all this "hot air". The loneliness of the central character is therefore deepened not by the desertion of the neighbours but by his sudden realization that he is truly all alone -- yearning for unattainable power, deprived of any significance in real life, and incapable of belonging to his own or his wife's "class".

As a novella with a Chekhovian ending, (though the tears at the end recall Pirandello's short story *War*). *The Tears of a Nobody* represents a genre that is becoming increasingly popular; and it is the nearest thing to the complex form aspired to by members of the Society who, each in his own way, sought to relate modernist genres to our Arabic tradition.

* * *

The Muslims are Coming

(i) Ahmed Bahgat's *Ramadan Diary*

Ahmed Bahgat occupies a unique position among modern Arab writers. As a journalist who contributes a daily column to *Al-Ahram*, the most popular daily in the Arab world, he has managed to maintain a high level of interest in his work by striking a balance between the high seriousness of his writing on Islam and the sense of humour which enlivens his social criticism. It is, in fact, difficult to exaggerate his influence: a writer who presents fresh and "enlightened" ideas on a subject as beset with difficulties and misunderstandings as the relevance of religion to the modern world, who can reach the common man by speaking his language, and who can maintain a tone of "poetic wonder" even when dealing with apparently "prosaic" topics, is bound to have a vast following.

Bahgat's faith in the relevance of Islam to today's world relies on those concepts which it shares with other revealed religions but which are being increasingly ignored by the "multitude" who, owing to the current methods of teaching religion which he sees as defective, seem to see nothing in religion beyond the physical forms of worship. Bahgat accepts these forms, no doubt, but he digs deep in search of the meaning and implications of each, his field being the spirit, and his scene of action the soul of man. Though comparable in this to Mustafa Mahmoud, he takes a distinctively individual line. Mahmoud's

approach is to show that the discoveries of modern science confirm the existence of a universal mind, that the Creator can be seen in His creation, and that the 'cold eye of reason' is capable of perceiving what the heart feels to exist. Bahgat does not venture into this area at all, believing that the 'living heart' of man is enough, and that modern man can discover for himself the beauty and true warmth of religion through feeling. By reposing so much trust in man's innate powers -- intuition, introspection and feeling -- Bahgat expects each individual to be true to himself, implying that this will allow him the full exercise of his mental powers. In other words, man's intellect is regarded as the servant of the heart; and it is the heart that both leads to communion with God and dictates the moral sense. Hence the extraordinary emphasis placed by Bahgat on truthfulness and his relentless attack on hypocrisy.

In this sense, Bahgat is a moralist; but he is a modern moralist who recognizes human weakness and even sympathizes with it. He can soar to lofty pinnacles of poetry when he deals with a purely religious subject, as he does in his *Mystic Seas of Love*, but he prefers the realism of the down-to-earth anecdote, with men's foibles as his immediate concern. His style is therefore necessarily different from that of the professional "Islamic" writers (the Moslem clergy who deal in clichés and only repeat what they read in books on exegesis) and from Mustafa Mahmoud's rational, discursive, often abstract style[1]. For Bahgat's style appears to follow naturally from the real-life situations he focuses on; and you often feel that he simply writes as he thinks, that his performance on paper is not just a reflection of his

(1) Mahmoud can in fact be poetic and his style is often highly literary. Cf. his *Marxism and Islam*, Cairo, 1977, and *The Quran: An Attempt at a Modern Reading* Cairo, 1984, both done into English by M. Enani.

thought processes but actually a living thought process. That is why he is never dogmatic, never giving ready-made answers, but only asking the questions which he feels must arise naturally from the situations he handles – and an heuristic style, by definition, invites the reader to share in the thought process and think for himself.

But it is on account of his peculiar sense of humour that I regard Ahmed Bahgat as a serious enough writer! Paradoxical as this may sound, the fact is that his sense of humour turns his social criticism into satire of the very first order. And Bahgat's satire, which the present selection from his *Diary of a Fasting Moslem* (here given the title of *Ramadan Diary*) clearly demonstrates, is as calm and subtle as any of the advanced varieties in world literature. His humour is definitely all his own and cannot be confused with that of the professional humourists, but it is essentially Egyptian -- a statement which requires a little explanation.

I have touched elsewhere(2) upon the special brand of Egyptian humour which shares the standard features of world humour and relies on the same technical devices (such as overstatement, understatement, the incongruous, burlesque, grotesque etc.) but differs in employing those fights of fancy to which a frustrated or deprived person might resort. Like all jokes, the typical Egyptian joke is closely related to its cultural matrix and, owing to historical circumstances, the typical Egyptian mind has always resorted to fantasy to compensate for the sordid reality it has to accept. A government employee may in any country object to the despotism of his superiors at work, especially his immediate boss: he may complain, he may quarrel with him, and he may even feel forced to resign. In Egypt a government employee may do, of course, any or all of these things; but a typical reaction is,

(2) "Introduction" to Gamal el-Ghitani's *Incidents in Zafrani Alley*, Cairo, 1986, p. 17.

especially if he is helpless to stand up to him in reality, to resort to fantasy. He may indulge in imaginary conversations with his boss, getting the better of him all the time, but, occasionally, he may use his sense of humour in creating ridiculous images of him and may, in his mind's eye, put him in most embarrassing situations. This often comes to the surface, either with the employee cracking jokes about his boss with his colleagues, or giving him names indicative of the bad qualities he and his colleagues may like to attack; but sometimes the employee keeps his fancies to himself totally until one day (and this is by no means rare) obsessions are formed and serious psychological disturbances follow. Some of the fancies, aired or bottled up, contain original "metaphors" and are, truly, highly imaginative. Egyptians have used this weapon, down the centuries, in fighting their unjust rulers, native or foreign; and the *joke*, as recent studies have shown, has always contributed to the creation of certain potent trends in public opinion. The deep-seated tendency of the Egyptian mind to create ridiculous, sometimes appallingly grotesque pictures of people and things, accounts for certain colourful expression in the Egyptian vernacular – those metaphors which have become idiomatic through long use, both old (such as referring to a stupid person as a plank, to a deceived husband as a bucket) and new (referring to a wife as "the government" or "the ministry of the interior", calling a million pounds a "rabbit" because it reproduces very fast). Similar metaphors exist, no doubt, in all languages, and the human mind never ceases to produce parallel images, but it is the extent to which the Egyptian humour relies on fantasy that characterizes the Egyptian variety. In other words, a typical Egyptian joke may not differ in kind from a European or an American one but, if truly Egyptian, it will be found to differ in the degree to which it makes use of fantasy.

Now Ahmed Bahgat is a typical Egyptian and in real life never ceases to exercise his rich imagination in looking at things. I recall that one day, back in the 1970s when the so-called "Public Transport Crisis" reached unprecedented proportions, he wrote that one way of dealing with the crisis was for the Prime Minister to issue instructions to all government employees to walk to the government offices nearest to their homes and, as civil servants hardly did any work at all, the "official" machine would not in the least suffer, but the Cairo transport system would be healthy again!

It is the kind of joke you might expect anywhere in the world, but the serious tone which he used actually forced people to think! It was painful because it was in many ways "relevant", that is, having a strange sense of reality about it. Indeed, not many years after Bahgat's suggestion, most government offices today take a long weekend (Friday and Saturday instead of only Friday) and Sunday remains a holiday for "public sector" shops, while on Thursday many civil servants simply do not turn up for work. And the irony is that the new arrangement has been made "as part of an effort to deal with the public transport crisis"! I often recall that humorously serious suggestion, together with many others by Bahgat, though not in print, as indicative of the way an imaginative mind works in the humorous vein. The fact that the BUS seems to occupy a prominent place in the present book is not without significance: at one time, being on the bus meant being a member of a community on wheels -- a complete set of people who take the same bus everyday, practically at the same time, to work. A European reader may perhaps think of the commuter trains which take people from suburbia to the centre of town and back, but nothing could be more different; for here the passengers knew each

other, talked with each other about personal matters which are never discussed in public in Europe, and if you were a stranger, you could overhear stories of the most intimate type, and your views might even be solicited on this matter or that. After the rush hour, when a motley crowd took the bus and did not know each other, things happened that had special significance and were the subject of small talk, sometimes serious talk, in the evening: love stories began or ended[1], old friends met and chatted, people's pockets were picked and girls' bottoms pinched! Most important, of course, was the over-crowdedness which made it inevitable for men to touch women or at least to look at them at close quarters -- which Islam frowns upon. While the "Ramadan Offender" episode illustrates "Life on the BUS" in Egypt (though it takes place in a tramway carriage) the question whether fasting Moslems are allowed to take the bus, which arises in the course of another episode, refers to the "unpleasant" aspects of bus-riding in those days (which have not completely disappeared).

Bahgat's humour must be distinguished, I believe, from that of the professional humourists, notably Ahmed Ragab and the late Muhammad Afifi. Unlike Art Buchwald, to compare him with a figure of world fame, Afifi was hardly ever topical. He never bothered, in fact, about politics and his original collections of humorous articles[2] deal with universal human situations. He could also turn his hand, not unsuccessfully, to the long narrative[3] in which the main device is irony, apart from local colour – those peculiar little details which become most memorable in him because freshly observed and originally treated. Ahmed Ragab is likewise a fully-fledged humourist

(1) Cf. Sabri Moussa's *The Incident*, Cairo, 1987.

(2) *Grim Laughs* and *Very Grim Laughs*, neither done into English.

(3) *The Apple and the Skull*, not translated into English.

who has written plays, a collection of short anecdotes, parodies and, recently, a collection of witty articles each dealing with a single theme, his favourite being the hen-pecked husband or the dominant female[1]. He is most famous, however, for his quips which depend almost totally on the punch line. He provides the cartoonist Mustafa Hussein with material for three daily cartoons in the Cairene daily *Al-Akhbar*. The first deals with the recurrent theme of the bad singer (symbolic of the present generation of mediocre musicians), the second with a humorous relationship between man and woman fancifully portrayed, under the fixed title "Love is.." but the third, the main daily cartoon, pokes fun at certain incongruities of life in Egypt through a parade of ridiculous types.

Bahgat is not a humourist in this sense at all. His witty satires have developed over the years to constitute an almost new genre. What I described earlier as his imaginative power may be alternatively defined as an incessant attempt to seek fresh angles of looking at a reality which he seems to feel cannot be very real! The poet in him rejects what the objective eye must see, and his inveterate passion for idealism drives him perpetually towards fresh vision and, in the process, some time-honoured, socially accepted and firmly established norms break down to reveal the incongruities and contradictions which the satirist handles.

Ramadan Diary was written more than fifteen years ago, at a time when Egypt was still recovering from the aftermath of the defeat

(1) The two plays *Nonsense* and *Utter Nonsense* were staged in Cairo in the 1970's; *Bonjour !* and *The Lyrics* (the latter a parody on the title of a classical book of Arabic literature containing verse and prose) were published in the 1980's. No book by Ragab has ever been done into English.

in the Arab-Israeli war of 1967. It is to this defeat that the current religious fundamentalist movement is generally attributed -- which is only partly true. The return to faith in weakness is natural enough, no doubt, and the collapse of the secular ideology (alternatively described as Arab Socialism)[1] which Nasser had wanted to substitute for religion, accelerated the process, even before Sadat came to power. The Egyptians felt they were in a way betrayed by a leadership that had pointed the way to new heaven, new earth, but had landed them in disaster[2]. In loneliness and weakness they naturally turned to God: and it was no coincidence that the apparition of Virgin Mary was believed to appear – and was said to have been actually seen by thousands – at a famous church in Zaytoun, a Cairo district, in 1968. The students' demonstrations in the same year were an expression of the frustration of a whole generation who now felt abandoned, and almost helpless. While attending a concert given by Egyptian musicians and singers at the Royal Albert Hall in London at the time, a Palestinian Christian commented on a song bearing the title "A Hymn to Jerusalem" by saying. "Ah! now the Egyptians have recognized God!" Throughout the evening we, Egyptians, were taunted with turning to God only in weakness and, "the Pharaohs have at last abandoned their atheism" was a common enough remark.

While the years 1968-1973 saw the birth of religious fundamentalism, this was not only due, I have suggested, to military defeat or to disillusionment with secular power. Another factor, perhaps no less important, was the rapprochement with Saudi Arabia and the oil-rich Gulf States: Egyptians were now allowed to leave

(1) Cf. my "Introduction" to S. Wahba's *Mosquito Bridge*, Cairo, 1987.

(2) Cf. my Introduction to I. Ismail's *The Trial of an Unknown Man*, Cairo , 1984.

Egypt (travel had been severely restricted for many years previously), to work in those countries and make fortunes (by Egyptian standards). The argument in the air was: "God must be partial to those people, having given them such a vast wealth because they are true Moslems; while we have opted for a secular ideology!" With the phenomenal rise in oil prices, more and more Egyptians left for other Arab countries and by the mid-1970s the fundamentalists were in a position almost to dictate their views. The period witnessed the return to Islam of many hitherto atheist or agnostic writers -- some of the famous "Socialists" and erstwhile secular "philosophers" openly advocated the establishment of an "Islamic Society", that is, a society based on the noble and lofty ideals of Islam rather than on modern "atheist" or, at best, non-religious concepts. Abdul-Rahman Al-Sharqawi was one, Mustafa Mahmoud another. Forces of Enlightenment, led by the British-educated elite, such as Dr. Zaki Naguib Mahmoud and Dr. Louis Awad, were now frowned upon, though they continued to write, almost swimming against the tide.

In such an atmosphere superstitions were rife and it was not uncommon to read articles in the press attacking reason, rationality and modern science as responsible for the "vicious" civilization that parted men from their religion. Self-appointed preachers sprang up everywhere; and most bizarre views were expressed on this and that matter, supposedly based on sayings attributed to the Prophet. Worse still, many people were willing to suspend the use of "Reason" and accept these false preachers, believing that "blind" credulity implied true piety. Once in Fayoum (one day in 1975) where I taught some of the poorest students in the country at a newly established Teachers Training College, a boy objected to my use of English exclusively in class, quoting a saying by one of the self-styled preachers who

objected to the "new-fangled" ideas about education, to the effect that only Arabic ought to be respected as it was the official language of Paradise! Sheikh Abdul-Halim Mahmoud, then Rector of Al-Azhar, had produced a book a year earlier about a famous saint buried in Tanta, Lower Egypt. In the "Introduction" he said that he had gone to the tomb of the saint and, though dead for centuries, the latter had spoken to him and given him permission to write the book. Gradually, as is well known, religious "groups" were formed which had explicit opinions on the modern society in Egypt (concluding that it was "infidel" and that it was the Moslems' duty to "emigrate" to other truly Islamic countries) and a confrontation with the State was inevitable. The rest of the story is familiar history. Today, though the fundamentalists are still very much with us, and though the religious-secular debate continues unabated, the religious fervour of the early 1970s has become more individual than social, and is often felt to concentrate on the way women dress (an extremely minor point by Islamic standards) and on Islamic rituals (whether they constitute true worship or not). There are signs which, if read correctly, must corroborate this conclusion: women have not lost any of their hard-won rights; no amputation of hands or public executions are included in the penal code; and the arts (painting, sculpture, theatre and the cinema) continue to prosper. It may be helpful in this connection to compare the present situation in Egypt with that in other Arab countries.

It is against this background that Bahgat's book must be read: he is in more ways than one a force of enlightenment. His religious passion is life-long and, though he has grown a beard like the fundamentalists (after all, it is a *sunnah*, that is, in imitation of the Prophet's practice) he remains as "reasonable" and rational as he was

when he wrote the *Diary*. One of his redeeming qualities is, I believe, his sense of humour. For in the *Diary* we have a protagonist from the people, a common man, realistically portrayed, whose preoccupations are precisely those of the average Egyptian. He is a government employee, worrying about his superiors, his increment and his wife's demands. Like many Egyptians he regards the month of Ramadan as the month of worship, a month during which he can concentrate on "other-worldly" matters, even while carrying on in daily life as usual. He knows what he should do and what he should not but, being human, he sins consciously and enjoys it. The selections translated from the *Diary* present a coherent image of the man, engaging in its simplicity and straightforwardness. The passages printed in bold type are often the comments of the author himself: as he does not propose to write pure fiction, he allows himself to interfere with the narrative, often to reveal a contradiction or to stress a paradox.

A light-hearted treatment of a religious subject is almost unprecedented in Arabic; and it is to Bahgat's credit that he can make us laugh at the practice of the false mystics who, though they had always existed in Egypt, gained definite respect with the rise of fundamentalism. The food offered and the way it is consumed are enough condemnation of those who are supposed to be ascetic and altogether unworldly. However, such pleasures are characteristic of the most devout fundamentalists and are symbolic of the new prosperity introduced by the inordinate oil wealth into our region. Again, it is thanks to his sense of humour that the hypocrisy which mars religious practice everywhere is exposed. On the Night of Power (Laylatul-Qadr) all wishes may be granted by God if based on genuine piety, but what do we have in the way of pious wishes that night?

Nothing but commonplace, mundane desires which are, naturally, turned down by the recording angels.

As literature, the book presents the satiric anecdote as a popular genre; it is important because of its vast popularity and influence.

* * *

(ii) Islam Re-interpreted:

Mahmoud's Modern Reading of the Quran

This is an unusual book. It proposes to offer a 'modern', rather than a 'new', reading of the Quran: rather than a different interpretation of the Muslims' Holy Book it gives a 'reading', or a view, to which today's Muslim, armed with knowledge of modern science and modern philosophy, may easily respond. Though its conclusions differ but little from those of the established exegesis, the book differs greatly in its method of approach. It makes use of recent scientific discoveries in the elucidation of many verses hitherto regarded as enigmas, and it unfolds certain concepts of mysticism which make the basic principles of Islam (or, for that matter, of any revealed religion) easier to grasp. It also differs, perhaps more importantly, in the manner in which Dr. Mahmoud shows the relevance of the Quran to the central issues of man in today's world.

I translated the title, rather freely, as a 'reading' -- the original Arabic says 'understanding'. Perhaps the Arabic word is more precise, as the author shows that he is genuinely trying to 'understand' the basic questions raised by the Quran, keeping his eye closely on the text but with his vast scientific and philosophical knowledge

providing possible avenues for reinterpretation. When a 'question' defeats his best ability he simply says 'God knows' and leaves it at that. The Quran being a Book for all time, the author trusts in posterity to make yet another fresh approach – perhaps the future will provide our children with deeper insights into the meaning of the verses.

It is not, however, so much the answer provided as the questions asked that make this book such an interesting contribution to our thinking about Islam. It is essentially an invitation to thinking: it seeks to query rather than answer, to stimulate rather than satisfy, and, in its peculiar way, to open up new possibilities for approaching religion in a scientific age. It is bold in its challenge to the separation of religion from modern science which appears to have started in the Seventeenth Century.

The only way of 'explaining' something satisfactorily, as Basil Willey has shown (*The Seventeenth Century Background*) is to re-express it in terms of the language (the bent of mind) of a given age. If an age is dominated by religion, religious terms must be used; if the prevalent mode is philosophic, philosophical terms must be substituted; if science, scientific terms. Seventeenth-Century Europe accepted science without questioning religion, for Descartes had made belief in God and the Soul axiomatic – hence their exclusion, as Spratt tells us, from the programme of the Royal Society. Thinkers of the age accepted the Cartesian dichotomy (which allowed the parallel existence of science and religion) and so avoided the translation of any religious terms into the language of the nascent, but fast developing, natural sciences. There were exceptions, of course, notably the 'allegorists', but the tendency was not, on the whole, in favour of 'confusing' religious with scientific terms. In the Age of

Reason which now dawned in Europe, Paul Hazard tells us, concepts were re-defined (*The Mind of Europe in the Eighteenth Century*) and vigorous attempts were made to secure the independence of science. By the end of the Eighteenth Century, with its dominant 'mechanical philosophy', religion was reduced to a vague belief in God. Every step science took in the following century seemed to widen the gap further by stressing that science and religion relied on two essentially different mental attitudes, reflected in their respective methods, which could never be reconciled.

When this book first appeared in Arabic, I casually browsed through it (at a book-stand in Cairo, actually) and my attention was riveted to the chapter on Heaven and Hell. Here was an 'allegorist' following in the footsteps of Grenville and echoing the dissenting voices of the Seventeenth Century, I thought; but, turning to Dr. Mahmoud's handling of Darwinism, I realized that a more serious attempt was being made to beard the lion. It was Darwin, no doubt, who dealt the severest blow to religious concepts. How was Dr. Mahmoud to deal with this "theory"? It was surely an insuperable problem, and my interest was aroused. I wanted to know, first, whether he had recanted his earlier views as a believer in Darwinism and, second, whether, if he still believed in it, he could reconcile it somehow with the 'story of creation' as told by the Quran. It was not, however, until I had read the whole book that I discovered what he was doing. Rather than relinquish his earlier positions, he now re-defined his terms, much in the same way as the linguistic philosophers had done (though with different results). He believes unquestioningly in the Quran's God, but does not reject the various avenues that lead to God – Spinoza's, Russell's, Einstein's, and Jung's! The ultimate truth about God is hidden from us and belongs in

the Unseen; but the essential truth of his existence can be apprehended in many ways, not least of which is the 'heart' – Kant's 'inner self', Wordsworth's 'thinking heart' or Shelly's 'feeling intellect'. The trouble with man's thinking is that it relies too much on language; in the few instances when man recognizes the 'sad incompetence of human speech' his thought processes break down and communication becomes impossible. But, communication or no communication, man does apprehend the truth and it does get across to other men. In the chapter on God's Names, Dr. Mahmoud states that the fault lies in our traditional patterns of thinking, especially in our tendency to deal with the 'truth' in terms of the out-dated materialistic science of the last century. Indeed, even today physicists have, under its influence, adopted the notion that to be real a thing must be of the same nature as a piece of matter (F. A. Lange, *The History of Materialism*). Matter was conceived of as 'something lying out there in space', Professor C. E. M. Joad tells us,

> It was hard (he says), simple and obvious; indubitably it was real, and as such calculated to form an admirable foundation upon which the horse sense of the practical man could base his irrefragable convictions. Now matter was something which one could see and touch. It followed that whatever else was real must be of the same nature as that which one could theoretically see and touch. Hence, to enquire into the nature of things we saw and touched, to analyse them into their elements and atoms, was to deal directly with reality: to apprehend values or to enjoy religious experience was to wander in a world of shadows.
>
> (*Guide to Modern Thought*, pp. 15-16)

Parallel with this view was the belief, inherited from the Eighteenth Century, that reality must be subject to the laws which operated in the physical world - that it must work, in short, like a machine. As Professor Eddington has put it, Nineteenth-Century science was disposed, as soon as it scented a piece of mechanism, to exclaim, 'Here we are getting to bedrock. This is what things should resolve themselves into. This is ultimate reality' (*Science and the Unseen World*, p. 21). The implication was , we are told, that whatever did not show itself amenable to mechanistic causation – value, for instance, or the feeling of moral obligation, or the sense of deity – was not quite real. It was a question of distinguishing what was real, 'scientific' and therefore 'acceptable' (cf. C. Cohen's *Materialism Restated*) from what appeared to be unreal and was thus regarded as 'unscientific' and 'unacceptable'.

Modern science has, however, challenged this whole way of thinking – and Dr. Mahmoud is well aware of this. 'Modern matter is something', Joad explains, 'infinitely attenuated and elusive; it is a heap in space time, a 'mush' of electricity, a wave of probability undulating into nothingness; frequently it turns out not to be matter at all but a projection of the consciousness of its perceiver' (*ibid.*, p. 17). There is now no need for those who accept the results of the physical sciences to write off, as they had once to write off, as subjective illusions the promptings of the moral and aesthetic sides of their natures, and the Nineteenth-Century gulf between science and religion is in a fair way to be bridged. Indeed, there's many a modern scientist who confidently asserts that science supports religion, many a religious 'thinker' who upholds the findings of science as vindicating belief in the Unseen. The only conclusion a neutral observer – an

agnostic or an atheist – may be justified in drawing is the negative one that the 'reasons which physical science was formerly thought to provide for supposing that religion was necessarily false no longer obtain, and the way is therefore, open for a reconsideration of the religious interpretation of the universe on merit' (Joad, *ibid*). Such a reconsideration has been frequently undertaken with varying degress of success.The point of departure also varies, and Dr. Mahmoud's early atheism has been regarded as a bold enough start; his real start was, I believe, his discovery (not re-discovery) of the Quran.

His beginnings as a liberal intellectual may be traced back to the late 1950s and early 1960s when his weekly articles, his *Midnight Journals*, on science and philosophy, attracted large sections of the reading public in the Arab world. These were 'musings', pure and simple, never restricted by the 'systems' of the professional philosophers. Indeed, he never claimed to be one, never dabbled in epistemology, ethics or logic. A physician by training, he read avidly, roaming at will from anatomy to astronomy, from biology to zoogeography. His articles reflected the variety of points of view adopted and the open mind with which he approached all questions of science and human thought. He was, besides, a successful author who churned out novel after novel, play after play, and relished the controversies that most of them aroused. His audience were therefore puzzled to find him change course; they had expected him to declare the inadequacy of science now that he accepted religion, but heard him uphold modern science even more vigorously, maintaining that it pointed out the road to the ultimate truth.

It has been mentioned that it was a 'spiritual crisis' that made him turn to religion; but how are we to define that term, if definable at all?

One approach is to do it by negation: it was not his illness, for he had been cured long before he started his *Midnight Journals* ; and it was neither 'personal' in the sense that J. S. Mill's was nor 'political' in the sense that Wordsworth's 'moral crisis' was. It could only have been intellectual; but then the intellectual crises of all great philosophers that lead them back to God contain elements that are definitely non-intellectual. Whatever it was, the experience of reading the Quran was the light that unexpectedly drove away the shadows. The uncertainties of science melted away like morning fog before the sure light of revelation, he tells us. The achievements of the natural sciences supported the knowledge that 'came from above'; but, being subject to perpetual alteration and modification, scientific findings confirmed the inadequacy of science as the only tool of unravelling the mysteries of existence. Man has been strenuously endeavouring to understand himself and the universe only to be baffled by the inexplicable phenomena both within and without. In fact, the more man's knowledge, the more he realises how little he has known and the more his knowledge is called in question: new areas of the unknown seem to open up indefinitely. But it was not to conquer those areas that Dr. Mahmoud went to religion, for he admits man's need to believe in the Unknown – the Unseen. It was rather like going to nature – man's nature and God's nature; it was, he tells us, a 'natural' thing to listen to his heart and then to see what his mind had to say about it. And that was his real start.

His work has since been heuristic. His earliest steps were, of course, cautious (which is natural enough); but even after he had acquired his characteristic sure-footedness, Dr. Mahmoud's method continued to be exploratory. He says he is trying to understand the

Quran, never claiming to have fully understood it. His style reflects his exploratory method and, with its 'obstinate questionings', has presented considerable difficulties in translation. Most formidable was the difficulty of finding a satisfactory English version for the Quranic verses cited in the book.

English readers must be used to hearing that it is impossible to translate the Quran (because it contains the words of God which are peculiar to the language in which they were revealed), though a good linguist may reproduce the meaning of the words for the benefit of non-Arab Muslims. Consequently, scholars have shied away from the word 'translation' in favour of 'interpretation'. As commonly defined, however, 'interpretation' is confined to the conveyance of the most obvious sense, though, in Islamic studies, interpretation is the discipline of capturing the most elusive, most unobvious, senses of a given text. Muslim interpreters have produced, still produce, different meanings of many a seemingly straightforward verse, and commentators have defended one or another of these. "Interpretation" seems to me a no less objectionable word than "translation" in so far as it involves a subjective element. What we are looking for in English is a word which indicates the 'reproduction of meaning' without implying that the foreign version may be regarded as 'equivalent' or a substitute for the original. Now in the absence of such a word, and because no translator or interpreter can credibly claim to be able to produce an equivalent text in a foreign language, any word will do - translation, interpretation, rendering or what have you!

As Muslims, our freedom to 'interpret' the Quran is severely restricted. We are guided by the views of the Prophet's Companions and immediate successors, and the exegesis produced down the centuries by trustworthy Muslim scholars. Without such guidance any

attempt at 'interpretation' will produce strange, if not wrong, results. At one time the problem of attaining the right interpretation (or the most obvious meaning) appeared to have been solved. Few scholars would disagree today on the 'surface' meaning of a given verse. But, as our language improves and our knowledge of ourselves and the universe increases, the hidden meaning of many verses appears and, with it, the need for the interpreter and translator alike to give both obvious and hidden meanings at once. Can this be done without risking verbosity, ambiguity and even vagueness?

It has been suggested that as the Quran is not a book addressed solely to the mind, the ideals of precision, economy and lucidity (highly admired in English) may be sacrificed and a language akin to the language of poetry may be used. Strange as it may seem, these very ideals are upheld by the Quran in every verse, though what is lucid and precise may appear enigmatic and inexplicable. True, the Quran occasionally resorts to the evocation of certain 'states of mind' and the translator may feel justified in using the 'language of poetry' – but which language of poetry? Doesn't this change from one age to another, from one generation to the next, even from poet to poet? May we equate the language of Milton with that of Herrick? Or, to cite contemporary examples, the language of Larkin with that of Hughes? Perhaps we can use the 'poetic devices' which all poets have used (metre, imagery, fluid syntax etc.)? But don't these again vary greatly in practice from one poet to another - to the extent that unless you are a poet yourself you will never hope to use poetic language? Doesn't a poet in a large measure make his own language?

No; poetic language, whatever our definition of it may be, will not do. Revealed in the language actually spoken by the Arabs, the Quran

was so unique in its 'natural eloquence' that it impressed them immediately as inimitable. It is not in verse, but is higher in poetic quality than anything their renowned and acknowledged poets had ever produced. And, notwithstanding the development of modern Arabic, today's reader is still struck by the uniqueness of Quranic expression. It is prose of a special kind: it has rhythm without being metrical; it has imagery without being poetic; and it is precise without being 'scientific' (cf. chapters 1 & XIV). Quranic translation has not developed into a science in the way that Biblical translation has, but I trust that in the fullness of time the questions I have raised here will be dealt with by the abler minds of the linguists.

For the verses quoted, I have done my best to follow the original text as far as possible, even whilst attempting to give the reader a feeling of the original Arabic, particularly in Chapter 1. I have relied almost totally on Arberry's excellent 'interpretation' in conjunction with Yusuf Ali's magnificent rendering. I found Picktall's version of the 'meaning' of the Quran very useful. Sometimes I had to adjust my understanding of a given verse to that of Dr. Mahmoud, sometimes my own reading differed from his and the difference was immediately pointed out parenthetically or was absorbed in the text. I do hope I have not done violence to the meaning intended or departed from the truth; of the Quran God says, 'None but God knoweth its interpretation'.

* * *

As this book is not addressed to the scholar or the specialist but rather to the layman, the style I have aimed at is the 'familiar style' in Hazlitt's sense. I do not know if I have succeeded. I often found

myself uncontrollably slipping into colloquial English, and I did not resist the temptation, particularly as Dr. Mahmoud's style encouraged it. Though an Arabic stylist of a very high standing, his eloquence is due not to the invariable elevation of his style, but to the fact that he can vary his style to suit his audiences. In one or two chapters he departs from the familiar style to use his own brand of poetic style – elliptic, allusive and so difficult to reproduce in English. Though I did my best to avoid the stilted language of the pedants, learned words did creep in. I only hope that the media have sufficiently popularized most of them.

Perhaps a final word of warning. Though addressed to Muslims familiar with the basic ideas of Islam, this book will be read, no doubt, by other men of different religions (or no religion at all) and it is to them that the following remarks are addressed. The similarities in thought and language between the Quran and other Holy Scriptures are only natural: Muslims recognize all God's Prophets and Apostles and are commanded by the Quran to regard them as belonging to ONE religion – God's. This is, incidentally, why I have followed Arberry and Youssef Ali in referring to God as God rather than Allah as the latter term might suggest a different Muslim concept or a god peculiar to Muslims or, indeed, another entity altogether. Since it is the God of Moses and Jesus Christ that we believe in, I saw no reason for substituting the Arabic word.

Similarities with other religious creeds, revealed or unrevealed, are also natural. The Quran speak the language of the human heart wherever man is found and whatever the age in which he lives; it is a universal language rooted deep in man's natural constitution. Muslim mystics, in particular, will be found to share a good deal with mystics

of all religions, but certian differences must be stressed. Dr. Mahmoud never uses words like pantheism, panentheism or immanence because of their connotations in mystical writings (cf. J. Boehme's *Six Theosophical Points*, to give a prominent example). He appears at times to suggest one or more of these concepts, though a firm believer in God's transcendence, and man's free will. Determinism is rejected, except as applied to the inanimate universe: of all God's creatures man enjoys the unique freedom to disobey Him: God's will is done in the end, of course, and man is seen as an instrument of enacting it. Again the word predestination is avoided in favour of foreknowledge; and, though they must amount to the same thing when applied to God (for God to know beforehand is to have predestined), the difference is there and it must be maintained.

Some Arabic words have been given in transliteration and their meaning (often various meanings) explained. An Arabic word may have different but distantly related etymological and idiomatic meanings and the former may thus throw light on the latter. The phonetic transcription of Arabic words may also help the reader to relate the meanings of words sharing the same 'root' but hitherto thought unrelated. The Arabic words for 'prayer' and for 'link' are Salah and Silah respectively. The Arabic for the Day of Resurrection is Yawm al-Qiyamah, where 'qiyamah' literally means 'rising' and is closely related, etymologically, to one of God's most beautiful names — Qayyoum, often translated loosely as Everlasting. But Qayyoum means in one context 'to whom we shall rise', in another the Overseer, from the root verb 'qama' which, when used with the preposition 'ala' (over), means to oversee. In yet another context it means the Ever-Awake, as in the verse of the Chair (The Cow, 255) where it is

followed by the decisive 'Slumber seizes Him not, neither sleep': it is here an emphatic adjective derived from the same verb 'qama' (to rise, to be awake).

Other Arabic words given in transliteration are those already accepted in English such as the jinn, being the plural of jinnee, and efreet or ifreet which refers to a class or category of the jinn. The common rendering of any of these as 'spirits' seems to me unsatisfactory, for the word 'spirit' must be reserved for its specific sense as the immaterial side of man, the power of immortal life breathed into man by God.

* * *

Brighter Horizons of Satire:
Mahmoud El-Sa'dani's *Black Sky*

Mahmoud El-Sa'dani belongs to the journalist-cum-creative writer tradition, so firmly established in Egypt since the beginning of the century. The combination of journalistic with literary writing is as old as journalism, of course, and I dare say, as old as literature itself. Before the invention of printing, there were early forms of journalism which we are only beginning to recognize: and the rise of the audio-visual media in the contemporary world, even their dominance in certain parts of the world, has finally established this. The oral tradition in pre-literate societies relied on a narrator who was a reporter or a newsmonger and therefore a kind of journalist. He took it upon himself to transmit not only the literature of his ancestry, but to interpret it (as a modern critic may be tempted to do), and to adapt it to the requirements of his audience, adding to it and relating it to the immediate life of his community. The village circle where he 'performed' hosted an audience which may be compared to today's radio listeners or television viewers, and he himself was not very different from today's 'radio journalist' – a term commonly accepted, at least in Britain. In Egypt he was simply called *the poet*, for he did write poetry himself, whether by adding lines or stanzas to the ballads (and similar forms of folk-literature) which he inherited, or by actually

composing new ones. In Arabia, before writing was known, poets were not simply 'men of feeling' (as the Arabic word for poet means) but chroniclers of current events, historians and authorities on matters of state. To the ears of his tribe the Arab poet gave news, comment, opinion and emotion, though not necessarily in this order. With the adoption of writing, poets became ministers in the modern sense; and a minister of state was called a 'writer' -- a term still in use today in Tunisia.

The introduction of printing in Egypt in the early nineteenth century confirmed the old links between journalism and creative writing. Men of letters used newspapers and books alternatively to publish their work and some of the early works which had survived in manuscript form were then published. By the end of the century, daily newspapers came to publish an incredible amount of literary material (incredible, that is, if judged by today's specialist standards) and no poet looking for fame could disregard an important daily like *Al-Ahram*, for instance. Thanks to the press, and the needs of an ever-expanding reading public, Arabic underwent considerable changes: the ancient language of pre-Islamic times began to recede and a new language, much influenced by the living languages of Europe, began to take shape. The period of adjustment and refinement was not as long as would be expected in situations like this, for, by the 1930s helped by 'universal education' and the radio, the efforts of the pioneers came to fruition and the barriers which had initially separated the language of the press from the old 'literary' language were finally pulled down. It was possible to produce works of art written in the familiar language of the press and the new language soon gained recognition as equally suited to the new literary genres (the novel, the

short story, and the theatre, if not exactly to poetry). The marriage of journalism and literature was not now so difficult.

Nor was that situation peculiar to Egypt. As early as the Sixteenth century, the broadside ballad in England was used as a vehicle for news and continued to function as a mode of journalism, even after Bishop Percy's *Reliques* appeared late in the Eighteenth century and the ballad was established as an independent genre. The writer's need to communicate with a larger audience, the ever-new topics requiring fresh, often creative handling, and the immediate response of the reader, have always been factors which either drove a man of letters to work for the press or tempted the journalist to try his hand at one literary genre or another. Had it not been for the press, Edgar Allan Poe's revolutinary ideas, both on poetry and on the short story, would never have struck roots so quickly; nor could the hostile critics without their *Quarterly Review* and *Edinburgh Review* help to establish, albeit in a curious way, Wordsworth's reputation. Similarly, it was owing to the press that Taha Hussein carved a name for himself in the history of Arabic letters early in this century; and it was totally owing to the press that he, together with Al-Aqqad and Al-Mazini, came to revolutionize our literature. Their work was subsequently published, of course, in books; but the first impact was that of the press-carried material.

It is hardly an exaggeration to state that some literary movements, though worthy in themselves and quite genuine, never got off the ground because of the lack of an organ as potent as a literary periodical, not to say a daily newspaper. The work of the members of the 'literary society' of the 1950s may be well known, and, as individual authors they are well known; but the 'society' as a

movement remains obscure, as I have mentioned in my Introduction to Abdul-Rahman Fahmy's *Tears of a Nobody*, which previously appeared in this series. In fact, most of the authors so far represented in this series are or have been journalists at one time or another – some full-time, such as Ahmed Baghat, Muhammad Galal, Nehad Gad, Gamal al-Ghitani, Farouq Guwaida, Yusuf El-Qa'id, Abdul-Fattah Rizk, and Mahmoud El-Sa'dani -- some part-time or one-time journalists, such as Abdu-Rahman Fahmi, Salah Abdul-Saboor and Sa'd El-Din Wahba. Sometimes an author's reputation is totally dependent on his popularity as a columnist, so that he is read as *a creative writer* with his work for the press in mind (such as Muhammad El-Tabe'i or Mustafa Amin). But sometimes the press wins over an established poet or a short story writer who may choose to continue his creative work for a daily or a weekly or to give up literature altogether, opting for a weekly or a monthly 'article' (such as Yusuf Idris). In either case, the work will be both journalistic and literary – journalistic in the sense of being designed to convey a direct point of view, perhaps drawing on personal experience of interest to the general public and calculated to arouse an immediate reaction; and 'literary' in possessing all the 'standard' features of a recognized genre, both stylistically and structurally. Like some of the better-known Egyptian journalists, Mahmoud El-Sa'dani employs personal experience in producing his original works of art (short stories, drama and biograhical sketches) as much as he uses 'literary' style and technique in writing for the press.

El-Sa'dani likes to call himself the 'naughty boy' of the Egyptian press; and the name is not inappropriate. He had at one time made a name for himself as an 'agitator' or 'mischief-maker', both in writing

and in real life. He had irritated the authorities in Egypt in the 1970s by being scathingly critical of the regime and actually went into voluntary exile. In Iraq he made friends with President Sadam Hussein, then moved about from one Gulf country to another, settling for a while in Kuwait. When the quarrel was over, proving to be more like a tiff than a real estrangement, he came back to Egypt to tell the whole story.

I made my first acquaintance with Sa'dani when, as a fellow dramatist, he commented favourably on the first play I had managed to have put on the stage. I had no previous personal contact with him except, I remember, a chance encounter in the old building of *Rose El-Youssef*, the weekly on whose editorial staff he was. That was in Jaunuary 1964 and he had, by then, established his reputation as a formidable satirist who attacked all and sundry. He had a weekly column devoted to critical remarks about the work of individuals, occasionally qualified, especially by those in high office. The circulation of the magazine rocketed. At the time, the printed word had such power that government officials dreaded his cloumn and held their breath as they turned over the pages in anticipation. The relish with which the cloumn was read was not only due to the boldness of his approach at a time when few people under Nasser could speak their minds but also, and more importantly, to the sense of humour which enlivened his writing and stamped his style with a Sa'dani touch that no one elso could share or emulate.

Sa'dani's humour is, however, different from that of Afifi, Bahgat or Ragab – discussed in my *Introduction* to Bahgat's *Ramadan Diary*, previously published in this series. It may employ what I have elsewhere described as the special brand of Egyptian humour and its

peculiar devices (cf. my *Introduction* to Ghitani's *Incidents in Zafrani Alley*) but it does not resort to those flights of fancy which I have identified as characteristic of the Egyptian mind. Sa'dani is a realist, and it is from reality that he derives his material, even if he allows himself the liberties common to all writers, namely the perpetual transference, juxtaposition and transformation of mental into physical realities. His account of his stay in England, no less than his detalied memoirs of his sojourn in the Gulf, are brimming with fresh insights into the life of modern Egyptians who are today forced, for one reason or another, to leave Egypt. You smile as you read his work, or burst out laughing at the incongruities inherent in our life as Egyptians wherever we may be: nor can an Egyptian fail to identify with the writer as a fellow sufferer, being subjected to the same pressures, both mental and physical, whether in this country or abroad. And it is this which distinguishes his humour from that of the others.

The short stories we today present are among the best he has ever written. They share the same background, namely the Second World War (perhaps with the exception of *The Prison Governor*) and handle material rarely dealt with by other writers. Few works in Arabic, in fact, deal with this turbulent period in modern Egyptian history. When they do, novelists and short story writers seem more concerned with national issues, such as the struggle for independence and the life of vast sections of the population in those years of political upheavals (and social turmoil) that led to the 1952 Revolution. Naguib Mahfouz is, of course, one such novelist and his work is undoubtedly great; but Mahmoud El-Sa'dani shifts his interest to less grand themes. His primary concern is the life of poor individuals, rather than families or larger social units, who tried to eke out a living under circumstances

far from propitious. Some of these are loafers, some 'comfortable' by Egyptian standards, but they all come from the lowest rungs of the social ladder and, with little or no education, could hardly come to terms with the reality of a world getting increasingly smaller. The impact of the war on them has never been recorded in such vibrant tones.

Though they do deal with war, these stories do not belong to war literature as commonly defined. For one thing, it was not an Egyptian war, and most Egyptians felt that it was 'none of their business' – a phrase uttered in Parliament which soon led to a declaration of 'neutrality'. Egypt was, in other words, on neither side of the warring parties, but the British had to make sure she was not, at least, on the side of their enemies. When British tanks besieged the Royal Palace to force King Farouk to appoint a 'safe' Prime Minsister on 4th February 1942 as they could hardly take any risks then, popular feelings ran high and the insult to the king was regarded as an insult to the whole nation.

Egypt's 'fictitious neutrality', as Durrell has so eloquently put it, was a living paradox: the people rightly regarded the occupiers of their land as the enemy while official Egypt, bound to Britain by a Treaty of Friendship since 1936, could not declare otherwise. In book after book, from Mrs. I. Amin's *Seven Years in the Sun* to Olivia Manning's article 'Cairo: Back from the Blue' (contributed to Derek Jewell's *Alamein and the Desert War*) this paradox is stressed and analysed. In fact, for all that has been written about the war years in Egypt, whether by historians like A.L. El-Sayed (who concerns herself enitrely with politics) or by novelists like Lawrence Durrell who creates his own world in Alexandria (in *The Alexandria Quartet*) the

real life of the Egyptians during the war remains a mystery. Books in English focus on the life of the British in Egypt, and most of us are familiar with Newby's *The Picnic at Sakkara* and Manning's *Levant Trilogy* : while books in Arabic deal with political history, touching but lightly on the life of the 'base wallahs' inside and outside Cairo. Not even in Naguib Mahfouz, the literary historian of the pre-Revolution years, do we find the full impact of the war-years on the ordinary Egyptians. This I have found odd; for in my schooldays I came in contact with many Egyptians who had worked with the British and had very interesting experiences not unsimilar to the ones related by Sa'dani. In fact, we lived in the shadow of the great war for many years and I had expected the novelists in particular to reflect the war tribulations in their work. Sa'dani is among the few who have done so.

Artistically, Sa'dani soars high indeed when he finds his favourite 'type' -- an unsophisticated Egyptian forced to deal with a world not his own. The sense of discovery in each story, the shock of realization, and the 'fate' that the war represents combine to capture the quality of Egyptian life at the time. In *The Black Sky*, the author's voice is not heard until the very end when, in subtle undertones, war is condemned. The unravelling of the plot, if plot it is, follows the pattern of Maupassant's *In the Moonlight,* a story made popular in the 1950s in Egypt. The ironic twist in the ending distinguishes the story from the French master's, apart, of course, from Sa'dani's typical zigzagging line of action.

The episodic structure of this as well as other stories together with Sa'dani's tendency to use a style as close as possible to the colloquial, has deprived him of the recognition of the 'literary

establishment' in Egypt, that is, the critics who decide which works are to be taught at university and which are not. The academics objected to his loose structure and open-ended techniques, while the non-academics found his 'familiar style' too bald. In short, he had a similar fate to Orwell's before he turned to the great political allegories; but Sa'dani is still read with pleasure, and still writes with pleasure.

The Genius is perhaps a perfect example of a 'character story', where an individual is portrayed with all the colours of a real Egyptian loafer. Though essentially a war-story, it seems to me as much relevant to today's Egypt as any of the stories written in the late 1980s. The reader will be surprised to learn that some of Fahmy's projects, which no sober mind can begin to consider, have not been impossible to carry out, and that more fantastic ones have actually succeeded. This has more to do with the resourcefulness of the Egyptian mind than with the lunacy of the central character: quick and 'effective' methods of earning money are devised every day in Egypt, both legitimate and illegitimate, which are equally mad. Sa'dani has had first-hand experience of such 'characters' and he treats them in his writings without any condescension. But Fahmy is, of course, a comic figure; and the fact that so many like him in contemporary Egypt manage to make it shows that the author is condemning today's, rather than war-time, Egyptian society.

Sa'dani's technique is necessarily influenced by his writing for the press: he has little respect for the taut structures of the literary short story which he believes to be somewhat 'artificial'. Some clarifications are needed, however, if the controversy over his art is to be viewed in the right perspective; epithets like 'loose' and 'familiar'

need further qualification. By loose structure is simply meant that the 'human material' is not organized with the precision of the professional who cares more about beginning, middle and end than about his people. Sa'dani's people seem to be able to do what they like and to get away with it. Consider the adventures of Fahmy Ebeid: they can furnish material for a novel, and each episode can stand by itself as a tale of Egyptian life (like those of the *Arabian Nights*) if not as a short story proper. In a little over a page, we are given the traumatic experience of Fahmy's falling in love with Qadriya, making her pregnant, marrying and divorcing her, having a daughter whom he calls Soad (because, as the Arabic meaning of the word suggests, she brought him good fortune) as well as maintaining his affair with Qadriya after their divorce. The quick and abrupt manner in which all this is related may make the reader somewhat uneasy, especially if brought up on the tradition of the Western short story, but it should not: it is deliberate and quite in line with the purpose of the writer and, more importantly, with Fahmy's character. As seen by Fahmy, the experience was far from traumatic -- an episode in his life worthy of no more serious treatment. The fact that Fahmy regarded it as insignificant is, in fact, significant; for it enables the author to make use of it in the end by varying the point of view a little. In other words, we are allowed to look at his renewed relationship with Qadriya, now completely fallen, partly because of the war, partly because of *him*, as spelling out his real end. Before meeting her again by chance in the street, Fahmy must have looked older than his age (many years older) as a result of the mental strain to which he had been subjected. All doors to a good future of the kind he had envisaged were now completely closed in his face and he must have come to accept defeat. His personal war had come to an end and,

bumping into Qadriya again when she had fallen to lower depths than a harlot, he must have realized that he could not now but face reality. The dreamer and perpetrator of impossible projects is now forced to live in the real world, now sordid and morally squalid. The temptation of the flashy car and the easy life could not be resisted because it is the only end to which the meandering road of his life could have led to: he succumbs and falls.

As a modern short story, *The Genius* is governed from beginning to end by Fahmy's point of view, and the attempts by the narrator to keep Fahmy away from us, at a distance long enough to maintain his comic posture, do not basically alter this. Realistic details would have been certainly out of place and the reunion with Qadriya in the end had to be equally quick and abrupt as the first meeting with her. For all his comic qualities and bizzare dreams, I find Fahmy lovable enough: he may be a type, but he is such a common type (apart from being so true to life) that one is inevitably fascinated by him.

Of the other 'war-stories' I need say little. Each has a central character that is made part of a 'war situation' and manages to reveal an aspect of Egyptian life that did not come to an end with the war. The only exception is *The Prison Governor* where the setting may not be war-time Egypt but Egypt at any time. The emphasis is on a human relationship under the obvious strain of prison but then, again, the experience is so typically Egyptian it can happen anywhere outside prison. I would like in conclusion to venture an opinion regarding Sa'dani's style which is often frowned upon: I find it economic, uncluttered and, indeed smooth. I certainly believe that his journalistic training has been an advantage: to be able to jettison the 'literariness' of official literary Arabic is an achievement worthy of note. Like

Ahmed Bahgat and the satirists, Sa'dani finds himself fascinated by the 'spirit of the age' -- the ironical, often sarcastic mode of our times; and, like him too, he never resorts to cynicism. I hope that this collection of short stories will adequately illustrate the main features of his work.

* * *

SPOTS OF TIME

An autobiographical account of Modern Egyptian Drama

Enani's *Prisoner and Jailer*

No playwright can be expected to be his own critic: no author can distance himself sufficiently from his work to judge it objectively. I have, therefore, thought it better to focus on a few 'spots of time' which, revisited, may help the reader to understand the man behind the work, if not the work itself. I hope that this 'note' will throw some light on an unusual landscape, though I cannot claim to be able totally to separate my personal views from the 'events' reported: Wordsworth's image in *The Prelude* illustrates my position:

> As one who hangs down-bending from the side
> Of a slow-moving boat, upon the breast
> Of a still water, solacing himself
> With such discoveries as his eye can make
> Beneath him in the bottom of the deep,
> Sees many beauteous sights – weeds, fishes, flowers,
> Grots, pebbles, roots of trees, and fancies more,
> Yet often is perplexed and cannot part
> The shadow from the substance, rocks and sky,

> Mountains and clouds, reflected in the depth
> Of the clear flood, from things which there abide
> In their true dwelling; now is crossed by gleam
> Of his own image, by a sun-beam now,
> And wavering motions sent he knows not whence,
> Impediments that make his task more sweet;

In other words, I cannot presume to be absolutely 'neutral' even when recording such incidents as are 'neutral' enough to allow no or little interpretation. In my experience, a serious attempt at veracity can do no better than guarantee the 'essential truth', to quote Wordsworth again, 'of the scene'.

* * *

My earliest memory of a theatrical performance goes back to the War years. At the time I had been learning the Quran in a Quranic teaching School in my hometown, Rosetta. The town was very small and, situated at the Northernmost tip of Egypt, where the Nile flows into the Mediterranean, seemed to be the end of the world. I often wondered why when the train coming from Alexandria arrived it simply stopped dead: the engines were silent and the only other direction it could take was back. The train was called Waboor (from the Latin Vapor) and the clouds of steam sent up by its little chimney as it approached had an unusual charm - a mysterious white line on the horizon which, coupled with the melancholy 'whistle', declared the end of a journey. The station was in the middle of fruit orchards, and we amused ourselves by picking the windfall while waiting to look at the passengers arriving from the 'outside world'. The war had meant very little to us. I could read posters all over the town which

read 'the victory of the Allies is certain' or 'the enemies will be defeated'; I could also overhear my father discussing the 'desert war' with my uncles, but, naturally, I understood nothing at all. All I could know was that because life in Alexandria was not safe (the Germans had been bombing it, I later came to know), many people were flocking to Rosetta or seeking refuge in near-by villages. One day I heard from my friends that a theatrical troupe had arrived and would soon be performing in town. Though it was summer I still went to school and my classmates told me that it could cost a whole penny to see them 'play'. As the end-of-Ramadan Feast was approaching, I decided to use some of my 'Feast Money' in getting the tickets.

When the 'big day' arrived, I went with a 'nanny' who had come from Cairo (by car!) and spoke an 'educated' variety of Arabic. She wore Western clothes and, though quite plain (to judge from later photographs), turned the heads of all the men as we slowly walked in the streets of Rosetta towards al-Manshar, a vast unfenced courtyard where the stage was built. It was about nine in the morning when we arrived, but the place was overcrowded - Al-Manshar, originally a place where fishermen spread their nets to dry, hence its name, was now an amusement park in full swing, as was usual throughout the three days of the Feast. We looked for the stage but only found a huge tent, of the kind erected at wedding receptions and wakes, with two men standing at the entrance. There was no box office but an actual box wherein the pennies were put. One of the men, apparently fascinated by the European appearance of Bahiyyah, the nanny, who was slim and graceful and walked and talked very elegantly, insisted that we sit in the first row. He made noises and vacated two seats for us. I later came to know that she came from Sudan and had been a

'governess' with an English family before being employed by my uncle.

Bahiyyah thanked him sweetly without returning his smiles: she concentrated on introducing me to the art of acting, which she said flourished in war-time Cairo. The stage, built especially for the occasion, consisted of a number of huge tables of the kind used in institutional catering in Egypt, put side by side, and was over a metre high. On top a carpet, of the locally woven variety, was spread and, upstage, there were a few chairs on which the musicians sat. The stage looked spacious enough to my young eyes, but I believe it must have been very small. There were no curtains and the audience could watch the 'action' from any angle they chose. Most of them sat on chairs or long wooden benches, but many preferred to stand up and move about freely in the open auditorium. Some had crossed the Nile from the East Bank and were wearing their Feast best, but there were few women and children.

Soon the music strarted to indicate the beginning of the performance. I craned my neck to see the musicians: there were two violinists, one lutist, and three drummers using different sizes and shapes of drums. Finding I was uncomfortable, Bahiyyah put me on her knees and now I could see the actors climbing on to the stage from the back. They were dressed in funny clothes and, after greeting the audience, withdrew: they disappeared backstage, leaving only two facing us. One told us he had wonderful adventures to relate: he had had an illustrious career, he said, in hunting and shooting but that now, owing to the stupidity of his servant (played by the other actor) he was a pauper. The servant defended himself, explaining that his master was cruel to God's creatures, and that all he did was save the

innocent lives of animals and birds. A dialogue ensued which, I thought, was very funny, but few people laughed. We eventually came to know the reason for the dispute: the 'master' was here, at the palace of a rich 'Lady' to apply for the job of chef and had prepared a speech on culinary arts while in fact he could not 'boil an egg'. The servant threatened to give him away if he did not get a job in the kitchen, 'for there, at least, you are certain not to go hungry'. The 'situation' appealed to me, and I could see that my companion was amply amused, when the audience began to yell. I gathered they demanded somebody to appear (because they repeated a certain name with great fervour). There was a sudden uproar soon when a woman came on to the stage and Bahiyyah whispered to me that she was the Lady of the Mansion. She was dressed in a long, black cloak, with a tiara on her head. The audience greeted her and threw pennies in her direction, which the two actors collected and put aside into one of the small drums. 'If you want to get the job', she addressed the 'master', 'you must be able to make me dance'. The master seemed to be shocked, whereupon the servant quickly started to beat a small drum and, taking off her cloak, the woman began to dance to the beat, while the musicians got busy.

The audience were thrilled. The woman was apparently a famous belly-dancer of the kind employed in rural areas to amuse the men by singing and dancing and cracking crude jokes. Everybody seemed happy, except Bahiyyah who told me that the woman's dancing was not good enough. She said she was familiar with that sketch and that the 'lion' would now appear. The word was enough to excite me, as other members of the audience had been apparently excited in anticipation of the lion. When the demand was made for the lion to

appear, the music stopped and the dancer withdrew (she must have danced for a good thirty minutes) and a man wearing a lion's head, roaring in a most horrid manner, climbed the stage. The servant rushed to the 'lion' and warned him: 'My master will kill you! Go away! You don't know my master! He's the devil incarnate!' The 'master' now flaunted a wooden rifle, boasting that he could split the lion's head in two, whereupon the lion ran away. I cannot recollect how the 'play' ended in fact: it seemed 'endless' and I could have watched it for ever. It was well after lunch-time when we left the 'theatre'.

When the three-day Feast was over, the visting troupe disappeared, perhaps touring other villages. But they returned two months later for the other Muslim holiday, the 4-day Feast. It was still summer and I felt 'experienced' enough to take my little brother along. That kind of entertainment was called el-Tamtheel (that is, the acting) but we had no words to describe the actors, the director or the author (there could not have been a written text). There was no local cinema in Rosetta and people acquired their knowledge of acting either from the radio plays they listened to or from the films they saw in Alexandria. For many months I wondered what the play I saw with Bahiyyah was about, and often asked my elders whether the players had other steady jobs: they could not possibly live on the few piasters they collected from the audience.

Holiday after holiday, year after year, I watched this visiting troupe perform in al-Manshar until, one day going out of the mosque after the Friday prayers, I saw the principal actor standing on a chair outside the main gate, with a huge crowd listening to him with interest. I joined the congregation and, managing to come close

enough to him, I realized he was selling medicines. He expatiated on the miraculous effects of a liquid contained in many small bottles which he offered for sale at a low price (couldn't have been more than a penny each). Those who had bought the medicine were apparently fascinated by his power of expression and enjoyed the performance thoroughly: they stood still and listened as the man spoke and gesticulated. The technical terms he used I assumed were too profound for me but I could follow the amusing stories about his life and the life of his friends who had used that mysterious medicine. It had hidden powers and worked miracles, enabling him to acquire a younger wife while keeping 'the mother of the children' equally happy. I must have been ten at the time but the sight of that man as he performed so brilliantly was imprinted with all its colours and contours in my mind. Was he originally an actor turned street vendor? Did he write his own plays just as he seemed to improvise the lines he now delivered with such dexterity? Where did he live? I asked myself these and similar questions, perpetually pondering the theatrical profession, until one day I came across a book by Tewfik Al-Hakeem which contained one-act plays.

That was in 1949 and the family had moved to Alexandria where I joined the Abbasiyyah Secondary School. From the book I learnt a good deal about drama as a literary genre: I was especially attracted to the dialogue which, though in classical Arabic, did not sound classical at all. Grammatically impeccable, the style was almost colloquial; but the characters differed drastically from the members of the visiting troupe who came to Rosetta from God knows where, as well as from the actors I now saw at the Cinema. I was now reading real drama; but weren't the theatrical performances I had watched as a schoolboy also

dramatic? The women who visited my mother often 'dramatized' themselves and performed regularly in the drawing room. I never left my corner in that room when we had visitors: I listened with interest and took in all that was said. There was drama in real life and theatrical performances in drawing rooms.

A couple of lines of 'verse' in one of Tewfik Al-Hakeem's stories (I had become addicted to him by now) didn't sound quite right. I asked my (maternal) uncle who was a physician by profession why I felt uneasy about them. He immediately explained to me all about metre, pointing out that Tewfik Al-Hakeem was not a poet and was not expected to write metrically-sound verse. Fascinated by the rhythm of that medium, I insisted that my uncle show me how to write verse. At the end of the afternoon I felt capable enough of imitating some of the poets I had studied at school and soon composed a good deal of impossible doggerel that caused a lot of mirth in the family. 'Though people do not use verse in conversation', my uncle had observed, 'some plays are written in verse; and these are superior in literary quality to prose drama'. He had mentioned the poet Ahmed Shawqi as the man who first introduced verse drama in Arabic; some of the songs sung by Abdul-Wahab were really extracts from those plays, he said. The songs sounded too lyrical to fit in a drama of any description. No, the wedding of poetry and drama appeared far-fetched in those days.

When we moved back to Rosetta late in 1950, I went to my old school armed with the ability to write verse. As no-one else in my class could do that I had delusions cf grandeur. I cast myself in the role of poet, disdaining the language of prose plays, not to mention the low vernacular used by the visiting theatrical troupes. My knowledge

of classical Arabic, assured by those portions of the Quran I had learnt by heart at the Quranic Teaching School, encouraged me to write verse and for three long years I forgot all about the theatre. Poems flowed from my pen as easily as I spoke and no girl in town was safe: horrible verses were indited to declare my love, true and eternal, to each schoolmistress in the kindergarten opposite our family home, and others, less ridiculous, on the regular occasions of the Prophet's birthday and the Muslim New Year's Eve. For all my 'religious' training, women seemed infinitely worthier of verse than religious occasions and girls seemed lovelier than ever every day.

One fine morning, however, the situation changed; girls didn't lose their charm, of course, but a source of intellectual charm now eclipsed all others: a young teacher of English, a fresh graduate from the English Department, Alexandria University, arrived in Rosetta to talk of Shakespeare, Darwin, D.H. Lawrence and Freud. Gamal Sanhuri was bubbling with enthusiasm. He spoke of the Oedipus complex (and many other complexes), of the problem of Hamlet, of *Sons and Lovers* and *The Voyage of the Beagle*. Spellbound, we listened as he spent hour after hour of our valuable 'English' lessons explaining psychology and drama. The ideas were too revolutionary for our small town to absorb: the students discussed them in their spare time and some of the talk spilled over to the elders of the community who were now preoccupied with the clampdown on the Muslim Brotherhood by Nasser. (Unable to come to terms with the Brotherhood, Nasser banned that Society, arresting thousands and, in 1954, executing the three most prominent leaders on a charge of plotting to assassinate him).

There was revolution in the air; and there was drama too. The fiery speeches made by the leaders of the *coup d'etat* could easily fit in a

second-rate political play but sounded, when heard on the radio, as inimitable specimens of Arabic eloquence. We followed the news of the row that flared up among the leaders of the *coup* and applauded Nasser when he emerged as the strong man of the regime. Every schoolboy now saw himself not as Napoleon, but as Nasser, and the powerful penetrating look in his jet-black eyes was awesome enough to fire the imagination of the young Rosettans. When an agreement was reached with Britain on the withdrawal of British forces from Egypt, the stature of the new hero, as 'liberator of the country', grew to unprecedented heights. The manner in which he eliminated all opposition to his rule, however, and the 'purges' he conducted throughout the country, had a distinctly unsavory taste. There was talk at the riverside cafe where my friends and I gathered in the evening about absolute power. It was at the cafe that our history teacher, a Rosettan who believed in the idealistic message of the Muslim Brotherhood, told us the story of the French Revolution. Our avid ears devoured every syllable and it must have been slightly after midnight when we went home.

In the morning I walked up to my English teacher, who had established a Students' Club, and told him of the dream I had. Had he been with us at the cafe, he might have reached a different conclusion, but he quietly commented, 'You have dramatized the present political situation, casting Nasser in the part of Julius Caesar, with you as Cassius!' Gamal Sanhuri could not have been right, for I had never heard of Julius Caesar, but his words sent me searching, almost frantically, for Shakespeare's play. It was not to be found anywhere. In our library at home, however, there was a slim volume in Arabic with the impressive title '*The Complete Plays of William Shakespeare*'. I voraciously read it only to discover that it was a

summary of a number of plays, not exceeding four, but that *Julius Caesar* was not one of them. I asked my father about that leader and he referred to Plutarch, but gave me a summary of the main action that didn't really help.

In the mid-year holiday a cousin of mine who studied at an expensive English boarding school in Alexandria visited the family home in Rosetta. She had done Shakespeare at school and had an English nickname as well: Suzy told me all about *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*, reciting important passages from those plays. A whole new world opened before my eyes: characters delivered speeches by day and met at night to plot the downfall of each other. And they did so in Arabic – not Tewfik Al-Hakeem's near-colloquial variety, but the highest style imaginable. When school resumed, I decided to abandon my plan of writing a play about *Joseph and his Brothers* (no less; I had never, of course, heard of Thomas Mann) and concentrate on an Egyptian version of *Julius Caesar*. Nothing came of it, naturally, as we worked hard at the newly-established Club on the end-of-year Drama Festival. I could never have guessed at the time that that Shakespearean theme could stay with me, dormant or lurking somewhere in the recesses of my consciousness, until ten years later *The West Bank*, my first mature play, was written.

The Drama Festival was held in the building of the local and only cinema in town (especially built in 1950). It included an anonymous play in classical Arabic on the conversion to Islam of (later) Caliph Omar Ibn Al-Khattab, a short one-act play in English by Ismat Wali, another English teacher (who proceeded to get a Ph.D. and join the teaching staff at the Department of English, University of Alexandria)

and many short humorous sketches, songs and dances. The Festival was a modest success, but as I had made my debut as actor (playing in every play and in every sketch) I toyed with the idea of having a career on the stage, but was soon to discover how unsuited that was to me when the family moved to Cairo.

In 1954 everything seemed to happen. Gamal Sanhuri left for Cairo to work as an announcer at Cairo Radio. I saw him again ten years later when, heading a small radio team, he visited the theatre where my *West Bank* was being shown to relay part of it on the new Nasser-initiated radio service *Voice of the Arabs*. I was thrilled to see him after such a long time and I could see he was pleased, but not surprised: he seemed to have expected me to write for the theatre and was mildly gratified. Another ten years later, whilst doing my London M. Phil., I met a friend who had arrived from Cairo on some business, (it was now easy for anyone to leave the country) who told me that Sanhuri, though a devout believer in Nasser, could not save himself from the dictator's clutches. He'd been arrested on some charge or other and released, but the experience had left him badly mauled. Thirty years later, driving in the eternally jammed streets of Cairo, I sometimes see Gamal Sanhuri's face, grey and hairy, staring at me blankly. Only the other day I saw the typical Sanhuri figure walk out of the gates of the State Publishing House: I rushed after him calling and yelling, but he never turned his head to acknowledge my call. Was it him or someone else? Where is Gamal Sanhuri now?

The school I joined in Cairo was described as a 'model school' and, because it had originally been built in the beautiful Orman Gardens, close to Cairo University Campus, it kept the impressive title: Orman Model Secondary School after moving to Agouza, a near-by district

where my family lived. The school had a theatre, a music room (where I learnt to play the lute) and a reasonably good library. More important, of course, it had excellent teachers. I soon came under the influence of my Arabic, French and English teachers. Our French master, Yohanna Wissa, was a Latin scholar and had an inveterate faith in his vocation as teacher. In a few months our class, notorious for unruliness, could converse in French, learn some of La Fontaine's *Fables* by heart, and recite chosen passages (needed for the oral exam, we had been told) from Corneille and Racine. The lines we learnt were limited in number, naturally, but we recited them with relish and in great excitement. French was still the language of the elite: now I believed it was the language of the theatre.

My Arabic teacher, Abdul-Rauf Makhouf, had at the time completed his M.A. thesis on Ibn Rasheeq, an ancient Arabic critic of high standing and wanted us to help him with correcting the proofs. What started as a mechanical job turned out to be a highly intellectual exercise: I realized how little we knew about our own tradition, that Arabic literature was so rich and varied as to be worth rediscovering. I also learnt that the verse I wrote could hardly qualify as poetry: my pride was 'chastened and subdued'. In 1982, browsing among books in a Jiddah Supermarket, I saw a book with my former teacher's name in it: it was his Ph. D., now published in Beirut and offered for sale in Saudi Arabia for an exorbitant price. I naturally bought it and wouldn't touch another book until I had finished it. I treasure it today, being the only concrete memento I possess of Dr. Makhlouf.

It was to my English teacher, however, that I became eventually attached. Guirguis el-Rashidi had nearly completed his M. A. thesis on Bernard Shaw and was contemplating a Ph. D. on the same dramatist. Like Sanhuri, he enthralled the class by his ability to range

freely from one branch of human knowledge to another, believing that his job was more to stimulate than to instruct. (We actually learned more English in that one year than in the previous four years of secondary education.) He was wise enough to be a father, young enough to be a friend and, believing I had talent, found the time to read my work and correct it. One of his original ideas was that the school should have an English 'Club' and an English magazine. The Club I failed to join: it included pupils with English as a first language who mostly came from the old Egyptian aristocracy and, believing I could not distinguish myself among them, I shunned it altogether; but the magazine was different. Dr. Guirguis put me on the editorial board and accepted three items for publication, including a dramatic brevity which he liked, he said, because it showed I could build a dramatic situation. I believe it had very little value as a literary text but that he wanted me to gain enough self-confidence to continue my writing. Not knowing what to do after obtaining my Egyptian G.C.E. I asked him whether the Arabic Department of our University (most teachers at school had been graduates from Cairo University) would benefit me as a writer. His advice, the same I today give my students, was that I knew enough Arabic to make my study of English worthwhile. The English Department was the obvious choice.

The discovery that I was not cut out to be an actor was made by our drama teacher, the now great actor-director Abdul-Mun'im Madbuli. He immediately realized that I did not possess the qualities needed for a successful career on the stage and, without hesitation, advised me to read English at university if I still wanted to be a dramatist.

I heeded the advice, but felt I had to act: there was such pleasure in being on the stage, pretending to be someone else and getting out of

one mood into another. I joined the dramatic festival to be held in Jaunary 1955. The 'society' rented the building used by the National Theatre Company for the occasion – the Ezbekiyyah Theatre, the George Abyad Theatre of today (named after the famous actor of that name). My play was *Gogol's Marriage* and I played the part of Omelette. It was adapted by Dr. Rashad Rushdi, that is, Egyptianized, so that my name in the play was changed to Salah El-Fahl – literally Salah the Big. The rehearsals were long and arduous. The late Ma'moun Abu-Shoushah played the leading role and, being a professional comedian, gave me tips, behind the back of the 'official' director (Kamel Youssef) on how to be funny. Ahmad Zaki, who was directing another play for the festival, gave me different hints on how to be even funnier. The trouble was that Shoushah's ideas conflicted with Zaki's. I liked them both, however, and I stepped on the stage to give a medley performance that nearly killed the director. Night after night, the audience roared with laughter: I was never sure whether they thought I was funny or laughed at the fiasco. Every night of that fateful week (it was the last time I ever stepped on the stage) I promised the director to control myself and play Omelette (or Salah) as Gogol had intended him to be; and every night, when I saw the audience rolling in the aisles I could not resist the temptation and ran amuck. To think that my main complaint of today's actors in Egypt is just that!

On graduation I worked first as a news editor/announcer at Cairo Radio, then, deciding that my career was really in writing, I resigned. I started the New Year (1960) with no regular job in hand, nothing to secure an income of any kind except, of course, my writing. A 30-minute radio play got me 8 pounds and I reckoned I could churn

out plays at the rate of four a month, which was more than double the salary one got for working in the government. In the summer I did some anonymous translations and some 'ghosting' for well-known names.

One text I helped a well-known translator do into Arabic was Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* : it haunted me, and the speeches of the great Greeks and mighty Trojans echoed in my mind perpetually. Could one ever hope to write like that? Better concentrate, I thought, on writing for Radio, especially that I had now been upgraded and got 10 pounds for the same 30-minute thing. What sort of thing did I write at the time? Frightful tripe, of course, but the money was good and the cast invariably loved my 'situations'.

The problem I had to contend with in those days was the lack of an Arabic dramatic tradition. Tewfik al-Hakeem's 'closet drama' felt a little 'unreal', while the new 'realistic' drama of Nu'man Ashour had not yet struck roots in Egypt. The ancient Arabs had not bequeathed a dramatic legacy, even if they had known theatrical arts, and I had to look elsewhere for a tradition. In October 1960 I applied for and got a job as a teaching assistant at my old department in the University. I immediately joined the M. A. qualifying classes and, for a whole year, I wrote nothing at all. Reading English at that level was not at all easy: English was a culture not a language and the process of mental adaptation was strenuous.

In the following year I registered for the M. A. but spent the long winter months still reading, often wondering whether I would be able to write again. The ideas I received from English books did not 'move in one society': they jostled against each other, perplexing me in the

extreme. No easy ideas of the kind I used in my radio plays were now readily available: perhaps I should abandon writing altogether: perhaps I was not a born writer after all.

My worry was not totally unjustified. The fact that there were different kinds of dramatic writing and theatrical performance in the West meant that an Egyptian aspirant to a 'dramatic' career must define for himself what should suit his talent best and prove interesting enough to his audience. 'Life' material had the strange habit of transforming itself into 'art' material fitting into moulds and structures drawn from a foreign tradition. An acquaintance who had been a university student in the 1950s but who was now a loafer, having been kicked out of the family home and rejected by three employers in a row, provided me with an Egyptian model for an Anthony. His downfall, as he laboriously explained, was caused by a woman with whom he fell in love (and cohabited for a while) and on whom he spent the legacy left him by his father.

His deterioration was more than tragic: the once 'history' scholar who had penetrating insights in the 'development' of the Egyptian society, who had inherited a thriving Dairy business and a huge block of flats which generated a considerable income, was now penniless, a drop-out, and, for all intents and purposes, useless. He was obsessed with the idea of committing suicide, blaming himself alone for his personal tragedy. The little drama I had started without success in 1957 on his tragedy could not be completed: now I was conscious that the Shakespearean formula could never do. Would a Shavian formula be more apt? Did I sympathize with him deeply enough to produce a 'tragedy'? Perhaps a 'realistic' comedy of the humbler variety could do the trick? What would the audience's reaction be to him and his

woman? I could not presume to have known her all that well, but I suppose I had to recreate her to ensure the right response if the 'play' was ever to be shown.

At the time, Professor Rashad Rushdi, then Head of our Department, had written *Al-Farashah* (The Moth, or The Butterfly), a play on a similar theme, purely in the Western tradition. The hero of the play is an artist who falls in love with a very young, beautiful and Narcissist girl who, as his wife, diverts him from his 'lofty vocation' and nearly drowns him in the quotidian banalities of her inane existence. The central metaphor on which the play was built was, of course, that of a moth extinguishing the candle flame even as it gets burnt in the process. The play had been performed in 1958 and had been well received by the critics but I now felt that the play was not Egyptian enough. The action and characters were too transparent, obviously designed to deliver a message. But I disliked this not so much, in fact, as I rejected the 'foreignness' of the play. In 1962 I was keenly conscious that no linguistic art could be more susceptible to 'foreignness' as the living dialogue in drama. Even if human character, as critics argued, could don the verbal garb of any culture under the sun, the situations which must involve real characters, should belong to the culture they claim to have sprung from. That was perhaps why Al-Hakeem's 'closet drama' had felt a little 'unreal' to me, why I could never be satisfied with his 'intellectual' dialogue, however brilliant his readers had regarded it. Strangely, some of my radio plays, defective as they were in every other respect, sounded more genuinely Egyptian. Though I was loth to do it again, writing for the radio could, I felt, be developed to produce more real Egyptian drama for the stage.

The period of total cessation did not last for long. While I was reading for my M.A. things had been happening that changed the course of writing for the theatre in Egypt. In 1960 television had been introduced in Egypt. Abdul-Qadir Hatim, an ex-Colonel with right-wing leanings, had been put in charge, having succeeded in establishing a new propaganda organ in the 1950s, namely the State Information Service. In 1961, as Minister of Information, he decided to provide television with dramatic material fit for broadcasting to an ever- expanding audience. 'TV Theatre' was born. The plan was that plays would be produced for the theatre, shown for a couple of weeks or so, televised, then broadcast from time to time. Actors were appointed as permanent salaried staff, but there were no available texts for immediate production.

The Supervisory Committee decided that some novels be dramatized for this purpose, and that translations from world drama be done especially. 'Dramatizers' and translators were chosen. The list contained the names of two young graduates from the English Deparment – Samir Sarhan and myself. Sarhan was two years my junior, but had a maturer outlook on life: he was a realist and a man of action. He knew what he wanted, that is to be a writer, and saw his way ahead clearly. He brushed aside my hesitation and got down to business at once. We shared enough to make our collaboration work – a great 'passion' for life, an unusual interest in people, and an infinite devotion to drama. In his presence, the 'questions' that had hounded me simply vanished into thin air and, when we started to adapt our first novel (*All for my Son*, by Muhammad Abdul-Halim Abdullaah) for the stage, we knew that ours would be a life-long friendship. (*Two Friends*, one of the one-act plays in this collection, was obliquely inspired by our complex relationship).

We were now, in effect, writing an Egyptian play, albeit based on an Egyptian novel. The experience of writing dialogue for the theatre, now all our own, was balanced by doing Chekhov's *Uncle Vania* into classical Arabic and Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* into colloquial Egyptian. Our table at the riverside cafe in Giza was permanently reserved; it eventually turned into a drama workshop, though also serving as a study: for there we devoured books of all kinds at will.

It was at that very table that in 1962 we completed our first individual plays, independently – I, *The Sixth Grade* and he *Fraud.* Sipping endless cups of coffee and realising that an individual success was a credit to the partnership, we went together through each situation, each line, each word of both plays until we were reasonably certain that they were all right. One evening that summer, feeling that my 'play' was fit enough to be judged by a 'master', I went to my old drama teacher and gave him a copy. When I saw him the following evening, at his request, he hugged me for joy and assured me that I was now a dramatist. At the time Abdul-Mun'im Madbuli was directing an adapted version of an English play (*Counsel's Opinion* – author's name forgotten) for a TV Theatre Company in Cairo: its Arabic title was *He, She and I.* When it had been done, he said, he'd direct my *Sixth Grade.* Sure enough, rehearsals started in December 1962. I naturally enjoyed watching the actors play my own characters rather than the characters of a novel. For three long weeks I watched my words being changed (for the better I must add) and my characters assuming the reality of human beings. Unfortunately, I had to leave Cairo for a couple of weeks and on my return I learnt that the rehearsals had been suspended. The actors were mystified, I was more than bewildered: no reason was given for the suspension and I was

expected to take the news lying down. I did enquire, of course, and though I cannot claim to have left no stone unturned, I did make an effort. People seemed exceptionally tight-lipped and in some eyes I could discern shades of definite, if unspoken, pity.

It was four years later that I came to know the sordid truth. Walking down a London street I met a one-time TV censor who had had an accident and was receiving treatment somewhere. I offered to show her the district where I lived and buy her a cup of coffee and, after the typically Egyptian pleasant chat, the conversation turned to politics. I cannot recall how my play came to be mentioned, but when I referred to *The Sixth Grade* she said, casually and almost flippantly, 'Oh, that communist play? We banned it of course!'.

The amazing thing was that though in July 1961 Nasser had launched his 'socialist revolution', nationalizing big establishments and confiscating people's property, the censors (especially those selected to watch television material) were suspicious of anything even remotely suggestive of such an economic (social?) revolution. Relations with the USA were excellent and Nasser was known, for all his 'socialist' rhetoric, to be anti-communist. But was *The Sixth Grade* communist? It couldn't have been, nor is this merely a personal opinion. Similar plays, not to say identical, dealing with the living conditions of government employees, were and are still being produced on the Egyptian stage. Some of my friends suggested with the benefit of hindsight, that it might have been 'unfit' for television in so far as that medium was new-born and hadn't found its feet yet. At any rate, it was a bad play and I am grateful that the censor banned it. I could never have it published or re-present it to a theatrical company. However, the censor's remark explained to me basic

differences between our 'system' and that of Britain where, as member of the English Stage Society, I regularly saw plays by Bond and Wesker at the Royal Court Theatre. It also explained to me why, when I complained to Professor Rushdi, early in 1963, that the rehearsals had stopped and that no reasons were given he simply said, 'Put *The Sixth Grade* behind you. Write a new play'.

And write a new play I did. Before the summer was out, *The West Bank* had been completed. Vehemently attacked in the press by Nasser's 'socialist' propagandists, and variously viewed as 'reactionary', 'pessimistic' and 'based on a sound historical sense', the play has always been special to me. It was my first to be put on the stage (April 1964) and naturally needed a good deal of trimming. As I have mentioned earlier, there were certain echoes of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*-- barely audible, but unmistakably there.

The central theme of the play, common enough in world drama, is that of an 'angel turned devil' or a 'lamb turned wolf'. The setting is a village on the East Bank of the Nile where a group of merchants meet once a week to do business with the rich people of the West Bank who cross the Nile for that purpose. A threat to the village is posed by a 'rumour': a bandit appears on the West Bank and forces people to stay indoors. 'Rumour' is a key word, in fact, for nobody seems to have ever seen him: simply say he's appeared and you'll strike terror in people's hearts and force them to disperse.

Now what happens in the play is that a 'simple' school-teacher claims to be able to rid the village of him. Some merchants, too, make an effort by hiring professional killers, but, since that bandit is more of an idea than a real person, it would be indeed impossible to physically

kill him. The sound of shooting is heard one evening, however, across the Nile and another rumour is born: the Bandit has been killed. Having been most vociferous in declaring his intention to kill the Bandit the school-teacher is arrested and a half-blind witness swears to have seen him do it. He is duly tried, but found not guilty (if only because no 'body' was found). Meanwhile the villagers, overjoyed to hear that they have 'seen' the end of the Bandit, indulge in a process of myth-making, turning the school-teacher in their minds into a hero. Sure enough, when he is released and returns to the village, demonstrations of adulation are organized, more or less spontaneously, and many real bandits approach him and put ideas into head. He eventually becomes a self-styled brigand, collecting protection money from the merchants and imposing a kind of martial law on the villagers. Instead of a rumoured threat from the West, now the villagers have a real menace – a man from among themselves named Gom'ah Abdul-Mu'min, ruling them at gunpoint. Soon, however, someone shoots him (in the internecine bandit wars) and a village idiot is wrongly accused of the murder. As happened in the case of Gom'ah, Ali the idiot is released and again crowned as hero, only to pose more serious, because more idiotic, threats. The villagers watch his transformation in disbelief as the play comes to an end.

When the play was first shown I was preparing to leave for England to do my much-delayed Ph. D. Some of my friends were afraid lest the obvious similarity between the situation in the play and Nasser's regime should prevent me from leaving the country. It didn't. There was a general ban on foreign travel and, for all the attacks on the play, I succeeded a year later in obtaining the Prime Minister's permission to leave (everybody needed that). On 12 May 1965 I left for London.

The news that our papers had been signed by the Prime Minister (Samir Sarhan's and mine, as he was going to do his Ph. D. in the States) was more than welcome. The travel formalities were long but we worked hard to ensure an early departure (you could never tell what might happen in those days). One paper required in my case had to be obtained from Alexandria and, as I could not spend the night there, I took a night train that was incredibly slow (it stopped at every lamp-post). I resisted sleep for a few hours (the whole journey normally takes three) but eventually dozed off only to wake up at the sound of shouting that seemed to come from a distant carriage. I rubbed my eyes and strained my ears, but could only distinguish the plaintive cry of a person who was apparently in great distress. Fully awake now, I realized that the train was plunged in darkess and that it was impossible, without the help of a torch, to move about. I asked my neighbour what he could make of that noise, especially that the cry was repeated at regular intervals. 'Oh, that!', he said, 'it is the madman of Anfushi! Surely you've heard of him! It was in the papers last week.' Questioned further, my neighbour lowered his voice as he explained to me that the 'madman' was really a 'dissenter' who objected to the expropriation of private property, though he was himself a pauper, and actually said so in public. The words of the mysterious passenger were indeed common but, heard in the dark and, almost drowned by the noise of the train, they had a haunting effect. The train now stopped for no reason at all, then resumed its steady, weary journey. I must have dozed off again, because the next thing I was conscious of was the light of morning streaking the eastern sky. In the distance there were hundreds, perhaps thousands of sheep. I am not sure I was fully awake, because what I saw was more like a dream – 'a prospect in the mind'. The sheep appeared to be marching ahead

in regular files, as though purposefully advancing to a definite destination, while a few stragglers could be seen in the distance. Had they left the shed never to return? Had they mounted their own revolution? Did they have a leader? What did they hope to achieve?

When I arrived in Cairo I went straight to 'our' riverside cafe and planned my new play, *Sheep*, later called *Meet Halawah,* this being the name of an imaginary village. The action begins in that play with the discovery that three to four thousand head of sheep have been stolen (or found missing). The official investigation comes to nothing and the government agent sent to that village, though drawing a blank on that score, is sucked in by the life of that 'uncharted' place (the village is not marked on the official map of Egypt as it had been built on land won from the Nile itself). The village is ruled by a 'Society' led by a strong woman and the people are given, Roman fashion, 'bread and entertainment' to keep them from interfering in 'public affairs'. The play naturally reflected my view of Nasser's 'socialism', but, as I soon left for London, it could not be completed until I returned to Egypt in 1975.

My return was less 'dramatic' than I had expected. The situation had, I found, changed completely, both socially and 'artistically'. Many private theatrical companies were now performing, but confined to Cairo, while the 'public sector theatres', that is, the companies not only run or subsidized by the government but actually owned by the State, were in the throes of death. Audiences now needed a new kind of theatre to replace the old realism of the mid-1950s and early 1960s; the demand for musical comedies, in particular, was great. It was perhaps as a reaction to the military defeat of 1967, the rejection of Nasser as a fallen idol (having emerged from the war as a paper tiger)

and the opening up of society, that is, the recovery of the freedom of speech and other essential freedoms (including that of leaving the country) that people came to reject ideologically-oriented drama and demand a return to regular theatrical entertainment. Owners of private companies were alive to the change and soon responded by adapting 'hits' of the Western comedy tradition to local tastes. Plays by Moliere, Feydeau, Shaw and Coward soon acquired Egyptian flesh and blood and drew large audiences. Certain films were farcically adapted and interpreted (*To Sir with Love*, *The Sound of Music* and *My Fair Lady* were among the more successful on the stage). 'Serious' drama naturally receded and, as the number of new plays presented diminished and the concept of 'drama' as such was distorted out of all recognition, critics started to talk about the 'theatrical crisis' in Egypt.

There was very little I could do. I found myself already classified as 'right wing', perhaps because of *The West Bank* but also perhaps on account of my life-long association with Rashad Rushdi, a definite anti-communist. Internal politics came to be mixed up inextricably with drama, and playwrights were branded or applauded according to the common interpretation of their 'leanings'. Most of the writers of the Nasser era, who had thrived on saying what the regime wanted them to say, whether in their drama or in the press (as many of them were journalists), now didn't know what to say, because they were not expected to say anything 'specific' by the government. Freedom of speech was something new and, though they continued to use the old Marxist jargon of the 1960s, freely and liberally, no audiences could be attracted. Many began to lose their social prominence and, feeling that their verbal stock-in-trade was no longer in demand, some left for oil-rich Arab countries, ostensibly in disgust at Sadat's foreign policies, but really to make huge fortunes. Some went to Europe, but

these had a rich cultural life to keep them busy. However, a general feature of the writing of all expatriates was the attack on Sadat, whether motivated by sincere opposition to his policies or otherwise; some went so far as to portray the 1973 victory as part of a real-life drama master-minded by the USA, the arch-devil.

The late 1970s was a difficult period indeed. It saw the rise of so-called Islamic 'art', Islamic 'thought' and other 'Islamic' things of the sort I dealt with in my recent "*Introduction* " to Ahmed Bahgat's *Ramadan Diary* (State Publishing House, Cairo, 1988). Some writers only paid lip service to this Islamic business but many actually jumped on the band-wagon. There were signs of resistance here and there, of course, but many would whisper to you, 'If you can't beat them, etc.' A friend of mine, a member of *The West Bank* cast, owned to me that he now believed that we should have an 'Islamic theatre' and that he was fully converted after the years of study he spent in (of all places) Hungary. I have no doubt that some of these converts were sincere and that many actually believed that the theatre could ape the religious soap operas being produced in Egypt and sold to Arab radio and television stations.

One day late in 1977 I went to see a play by Mustafa Mahmoud, the atheist of the 1960s who now became an Islamic writer. It had the attractive title *The Devil Lives in our House*. I was not put off by the fact that the audience left, or started to leave, after the first act, or that the quality of the acting was poor indeed, but braved the play until the final curtain. The play dealt with the need to resist the devil (represented by a lovely woman in the play) by confronting evil, not by withdrawing to a monk's cell. This was the moral and the action of the play. The long, boring dialogue between the group of dervishes

(Muslim hermits) wearing long white robes and holding rosaries, who represented 'good', and the lovely woman, their temptress, who represented 'evil', reminded me of the dualistic philosophy of the Middle Ages; but the golden locks of the woman left me in no doubt at all that I was on the wrong side of the fence. Presented by a 'public sector' company, the play was hailed as 'serious drama' by a reactionary (and utterly stupid) critic: no one else commented.

At the time I resumed work on *Meet Halawah*. My old plan stood, but the strong woman who controlled the 'society' gradually developed to become the type of all dictators: at times you felt the play attacked Nasser, at others you felt it attacked Sadat. It in fact attacked any military ruler who pretended to be democratic. Understandably, it was rejected by the censors, though their reasons were different. They were six, all told, but one was, apparently, more vicious than the others. He said that the play was against the 'regime', a damning enough accusation in Nasser's days, but not so serious in 1978. Another, a graduate of the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts, but as obtuse as they come, said it was communist. The rest said it was against dictatorship on the surface only, but really against Nasser who was, according to them, a benevolent dictator. The verdict was transmitted to me by a former student of mine in February 1978: it was evening and I was going to watch the dress rehearsal of Samir Sarhan's *Sitt Al-Mulk* at the National Theatre. I was naturally crest-fallen and told him about it. He had soothing words for me and insisted I should appeal.

The Censors Court of Appeal was a modest business: a musty old room on the third floor of the huge building housing the State Information Service. The Chief Censor (surname Radwan, first name

forgotten) had been an army officer, but was reasonably well-read. His assistants were aggressive and repulsive. One was a graduate of the Cinema Institute, a middle-aged woman with a frowning face; the other was a girl in her twenties who presumed to be able to read between the lines. The session was not long. My defence, carfully worked out with Samir Sarhan beforehand, was that the play was indeed anti-dictatorship; but that since the Egyptian regime was not a dictatorship (no one would dare admit that) the play was not against the regime. The argument seemed to do the trick and Radwan looked amused. At length he smiled and said he would pass the play provided certain words and phrases were removed and a final speech was added on the 'dehumanizing' effect of communism. When I showed willingness to do that, he said apologetically, 'I have a report to write, you see. You know how it is." We were about to leave and actually stood up when the sight of the frowning girls returned us to our seats. 'It would be much nicer, you know, if you could do this now', he suggested. 'What! write a whole speech here and now?' I objected. 'It is simple really: I must say in my report that a final speech which said so and so was missing because the last page was torn off the manuscript. All you need to do now is supply the missing part.' I was about to open my mouth when he produced a white sheet of paper and a biro and, without further ado, with Sarhan looking over my shoulder, I scribbled a pageful of utter rubbish. The page was photocopied instantly and the copy was attached to the original manuscript, whereupon he asked the younger girl to get the Stamp. Every single page was stamped and, as we were about to leave the Court, the Chief Censor, who was now fully on our side, walked us to the door and whispered to me, 'You may, of course, tell the director to ignore that last horror of a speech; but then he may choose to keep it in, to save his own neck, you know. These things are happening all the time.'

Throughout 1978 I tried to sell the play to every 'public sector' company I knew without success. The play had already acquired a 'bad' reputation as 'dangerous'. One Company Manager advised me plainly against having it produced. 'Why stick your neck out? Are you that gullible? Do you really believe this talk about freedom?' were his words. Another told me in confidence that a character in the play reminded him of Sadat and that, being an ardent admirer of that leader himself, he could not present it. I was helpless; Kamal Yaseen, the director who stood by the play throughout and actually suggested the change of its title, was equally helpless.The only thing I could do was have it published. Samir Sarhan wrote an 'Introduction' and the play appeared in 1979.

It was in those days of despondency that I looked again at some of my old one-act plays. One bore the title of this chapter but was written totally in the tradition of the Absurd. For a whole year I pondered the changed social conditions in Egypt,with the male-female relationship at the focus of my interests. What was happening in Egypt, I thought, could happen anywhere else in the world: a woman, especially when faced with the not unusual impasse in her relationship with her husband (or lover), that is to say, if she realized that the channels of communication with him were blocked, might, even if 'fulfilled' at work, withdraw to her private world, seeking strength from the rich life of her mind. But, for all the inner freedom she could thus enjoy, she would become her own prisoner, while he would continue to be the prisoner of his illusions, his own facile ideas of male supremacy. If the situation was reversed, and a man found that he could not penetrate to the private world of his woman, he might feel deeply hurt (especially in the case of Arab man, rarely denied access to his

woman's world) and his pride might force him to kill her – imaginatively or actually.

Resolving male-female conflicts verbally, which is quite common in the West, is excessively hard in Egypt because the linguisic machinery of most people is not developed enough to help them understand the situation properly, even if they are articulate. Perfecting the modern 'linguistic machinery' comes with education, regardless of the languagae used, because it is based on familiarity with the facts now popularized by modern science, as well as with concepts drawn from modern studies in the humanities in general. Man and woman still think in terms of black and white, while at the back of their minds the Arab tradition continues to suggest a dialectic of the servant-master relationship dealt with by Hegel.

The sophisticated analysis of the male-female relationship which may have started with Ibsen and Strindberg and continues today in Pinter and Stoppard is simply unknown in Egyptian dramatists. The treatment of this relationship, in terms of confrontation, continues to be crude, even in the expert hands of Rashad Rushdi, the dramatist most successful in handling this theme: the audience can have no patience with a writer who makes so much of such a simple relationship, you'll be told, as love (or hate). No Arabic version has been performed of *A Doll's House, The Dance of Death, Old Times* or *The Real Thing* : and I doubt if you could get the 'right' response from Egyptian audiences to Nora Helmer or any of the central female characters in those plays.

It is unfortunate that the concepts on which the male-female relationship in modern Arabic drama is based were influenced by the

image of love as popularized by American films in the 1950s rather than by the European dramatic tradition. The idyllic picture of love, which I first encountered in Somerset Maugham's *Red*, seems to lie at the centre of that image and most writers, I regret to say, still stop in their analysis at the 'marriage curtain'. When they do venture into the mysteries of conjugal life, they find nothing more dramatic (and I am not referring, of course, to television 'social' plays where this subject is taboo) than 'unreal' situations of infidelity. 'Unreal' I say because they are generally rare in Egypt: when they occur, their motives are not exactly those we have been trained to expect in the world dramatic tradition. Inconsistencies and confusion are all too common, which can hardly contribute to the development of a healthy dramatic tradition. We may have one or two Ibsens, and many Bonds and Weskers, but not a single Pinter.

I was brought up on the Egyptian tradition. Since the 1920s women have been playing an increasingly positive role in public life in Egypt, and have had a measure of economic independece; but, in 1979, I could not help feeling that the situation was changing. Other forces were now at play: 'The Arabs are coming', I said to myself, 'and with them totally different concepts of the male-female relationship'. The English reader will, I am sure, understand me better if I refer him to his own tradition before Mary Wollstonecraft rather than before Germaine Greer. What I have in mind is a whole tradition carried over from pre-Islamic days in Arabia to modern times - preserved, defended and even idealized by the Muslim fundamentalists of today. The real seeds of the problem can be found in the mixing up (and the often deliberate, though obviously wrong, equation) of the terms Arab and Muslim. As late as 1979 I felt we were required to return woman

to where she had been fourteen centuries back, denying her the seminal right of being herself - an individual in her own right, not a satellite of man. While Islam secures that right, or was meant to do so, the Arabs have always preserved their pre-Islamic heritage: they have changed but little down their long history and continue to treasure the values of their days of conquest and military prowess when only muscular power mattered. Women had been part of the war booty, normally divided among the men after the battle: and the restriction of the concept of woman to a sex object was maintained by the long list of military rulers who conquered and dominated the Middle East for centuries - down to the Ottomans. We could, of course, trace the tradition of slave girls and the female war booty to the Romans or to the ancient world in general, but it was at no time at all Egyptian.

The Egyptian had had an empire in Pharaonic times and their fighting abilities were proven beyond a shadow of doubt in the days of Mohammed Ali and his grandson Ismail. But Egypt is essentially an agricultural country and woman, the bulwark of the agricultural household, had been held in great esteem. The warships of Ibrahim Pasha, Muhammad Ali's son, at one time captured Greek slave girls but, Edward Lane tells us, the minute they set foot in Alexandria they were married to Egyptians and when Greece was liberated by the European alliance, the women refused to go back home as Alexandria (most of them settled down there) was their home. In fact, at no time in Egyptian history could you hear of Egyptian slave girls or of the concept of slavery itself: modern German Egyptologists have shown that the building of the great Giza Pyramids could not have been undertaken by slaves but by free people who voluntarily served their king who, they believed, was a descendant of the Gods: their effort was a kind of worship.

For as long as I remember, Egyptian women have mixed with men, both at work in the field or at the marketplace and at home where the 'orders' organizing the life of the community came from the mother, sometimes in consultation with the grandmother, but always in cooperation with the father. I am not, of course, describing a 'matriarchal' society or painting a rosy, and definitely unreal, picture of Egyptian society. I am only stressing the differences between the position of woman in a society based on the 'hunting' spirit, where pillaging and depredations are a source of pride for the tribe, and the agricultural society of Egypt which is based on stability and the perfect ordering of social units, from the family to the state. Egyptian sciences have always been developed with reference to the 'spirit' of agriculture; and a quality like patience, belief in life and growth, and the interrelation of earthly and celestial 'systems' or 'orders' may be traced back to agriculture. It was in the Rosettan countryside that I woke up to these ideas and, leading a communal life with my coevals of both sexes, I could never look down on woman as an inferior being. Indeed, in my immediate rural circle, the girls often proved superior to the boys in many respects and I cannot recall a single instance of a channel of communication being blocked between boy and girl. The city was different: and it was in the city that anonymity broke down the human links that had kept us alive for centuries.

Against this background I re-wrote *The Prisoner and the Jailer.* As a work of art it may have other facets unknown to me, but when it was performed by The Roving Theatre Company, a public sector troupe interested in the avant-garde (and the off- beat) the central idea of the play was easily responded to by the huge audiences it drew. A 'sign of the times' in Egypt is worth recording. The Drama Department of Alexandria University played host to that Company and posters were

placed all over the building with full information on the play. There was, however, a drawing of a horse on one side of the poster: my director was fascinated by the recurrent image in the play of the female character(s) of the play as a wild mare (or mares) – untamed and untamable -- and wanted the audience to be conscious of this. Now that drawing angered the students, mostly Muslim fundamentalists, who scribbled on it, tore it apart, and wrote remarks like, 'You cannot create: only God creates: be modest'. I had known, of course, that Alexandria was a city almost ruled by Muslim fundamentalists, but did not realize till then the extent of their fanaticism. A 'debate' held after the show one evening (Winter 1985) was attended by the staff of the Department and many 'ordinary' members of the audience. The actors answered most of their queries and, at the end of the debate, I was delighted to notice that the current of opinion was more with than against me.

The other plays published in the same volume may be regarded as 'variations' on the same theme. *The Lake* was based on a real incident, while *Two Friends* examines the dialectic of a personal relationship now transferred to the level of male - female communication. As I have mentioned, it is the most personal of these plays and, though published in many Arabic magazines, has never been put on the stage. (*The Lake* was done in Tunis and later televised).

The three plays were published, with another brevity, in a single volume in 1980. Some of my close friends believed the volume to be unrepresentative, especially since I, in collaboration with Samir Sarhan (yet again, 18 years later) had two documentary plays put on the stage, one in 1979 on Taha Hussein, the brilliant scholar who revolutionized our approach to ancient Arabic literature and who, as Minister of Education before the Revolution, made free and universal

education a reality; the other in 1980 on Muhammad Farid, a famous leader of the National Party who had in the early years of the twentieth century fought for the liberation of modern Egypt. Their opinion was further confirmed when I proceeded in 1981 to write *Al-Magazeeb* (*The Lunatics* or *The Dervishes*) – an hilarious comedy which satirized Sadat's 'open-door' policies months before his assassination. When in 1985 I wrote *The Crows*, a verse play on an historical incident with direct political relevance, no critic was willing to admit that these three plays represented me (with the exception of Mustafa Abdul-Ghani, who went against the critical mainstream in his *Egyptian Threatre in the Seventies*, State Publishing House, Cairo, 1987). Is it because of this that I insisted on having them represent me to the English reader? I don't know, I am sure, but I do know that whatever else of my work is done into English it will be equally 'unrepresentative': no writer can say what best represents him until he is 'finished'. But who is willing to admit that the final curtain is down?

* * *

Trials of Drama

Ismail's *Trial of an Unknown Man*

An English reader brought up on the tradition of European poetic drama will find this play unusual. The style is never poetic in a traditional sense, the dialogue often realistic, and the characters hardly capable of that depth of feeling or thought which accounts for the poetry in Shakespeare's or Eliot's characters- a Hamlet or a Thomas Becket. Indeed, in certain passages the author will sound deliberately anti-poetic: he declares his rejection of the conventional poeticisms of verse drama, however much he respects the genre as such, through parody. Where the dramatic situation calls for it - and it often does - his parody produces stilted language which recalls the 'inane' phraseology of traditional Arabic verse; and his sense of humour, combined with his insistence on audience participation and the anonymity of his central characters, produces a detachment (comparable to *verfermdungseffekt*) which is only possible in modern drama, especially that influenced by Brecht. Sympathy, not to say identification, is precluded by the author's unremitting attack on the way his characters think and talk (an attack which extends, as we shall see, to the audience as well).

Though the title suggests a 'Kafkaesque' theme, the play has little of the gloom or the 'claustrophobic self-centredness' of Kafka's fiction; nor, being a comedy (albeit a 'black' one) does it operate in

that 'unsteady area between objective and subjective', as John Updike eloquently characterizes Kafka's method[1]. It rather makes use of certain absurdities partly to bring out the futility of whitewashing history (and Arab history is no less a shambles than European history), partly to underscore the chaos of political nomenclature and slogans in today's world, particularly as their abuse has put a strain on intellectuals everywhere. However, in one important sense, it is the trial of modern Arab man rather than modern man in general – a trial wherein no-one is convicted, no-one acquitted. And the trial continues, with the adjournment of the court's session, for more soul-searching to be undertaken – by the actors, the audience and the people!

The idea of history being a psychological continuum gives a new twist to the action in part II. The defendant, who in part I knew nothing, heard nothing and said nothing, having been summoned from the depths of history to present an image of innocence and purity (of a 'neutrality' often associated in modern Egyptian political drama with the averge Arab man in his helplessness vis-a-avis his rulers) now becomes involved in the action. He is identified at once with the indifferent man-in-the-street who is mostly to blame for the tyrannical behaviour of his rulers and the rebellious intellectual who stands up to his ruler. He is identified with both *at once* so that at one level he is a member of the chorus who know the 'truth' but cannot, or would not, act upon their knowledge, and at another he sees himself as a positive 'force of opposition' like *Abu Dharr* and *Ibn Jubair*, the leaders who never shirked their responsibilities. We soon discover, however, that

(1) Introduction to Kafka's *Complete Stories*, N.Y., 1983.

whatever the 'depth' of history he is summoned from, history is not past: scenes from it are re-enacted and are easily recognizable as present. The action moves forward, therefore, not into the future but into the past as though the past was an extension of the present – an idea which Ismail presents with great subtlety. For him, the past is not a memory; it is certainly not the familiar romantic past of Arabic literature. It is a reality which we never question as it has become somehow part of our mental constitution. The modern Arab man looks forward not to the future, but to the past as an image, or group of images and concepts, to be lived and relived perpetually whatever their intrinsic value, and whatever their relevance to his present.

Believing it to be absurd enough, Ismail uses this idea in creating an Absurdist dramatic situation involving a paradox which lies at the centre of his poetic vision. It is not, however, until the final curtain that we come to understand the actual proportions of that paradox. Though for both categories of people, the positive and the passive, 'words' can be used as effectively as a 'sword', it will be futile to use them in the face of tyranny because 'power' will tamper with their meaning; but whatever the change in their meaning, words must be used because they are ultimately the only weapon available to the oppressed. Though doomed, the struggle for both categories must go on: they are not doing battle with a present they can change but with a past which has usurped their present and is now difficult to change. So when the defendant declares at the end of the play that he is 'optimistic,' he does not suggest that he has succeeded in resolving this paradox but, as we shall explain later in the introduction, that it is not impossible to resolve it if we possess the necessary knowledge.

The parallelisms and contrasts (between past and present on the one hand and between the two incidents from the past, on the other) reinforce this paradox by infusing it with metaphoric undertones so that the characters and incidents are seen in terms of one another, and the paradoxical situation in the heart of the play becomes of necessity poetic. The shifting images of oppressed and oppressor, of vanquished and conqueror, of action and inaction, enrich the texture and make the play 'poetic' in a modern sense.

Now as the past unfolds in part II we realize that the action does not proceed linearly but that it, vortex-like, has the vehemence of a 'standstill movement', sucking in anything and anybody that approaches. Repetition with variation emphasizes this whirling motion, for similar scenes from Arab history can multiply indefinitely as we move into the future (which is now, of course, the vortex of the past). To bring out the full force of this peculiar kind of action, Ismail varies his style considerably: he is sometimes realistic, using everyday language, even colloquial expressions, sometimes ironic, resorting to understatement or hyperbole, sometimes directly satiric, employing the well-known weapons of caricature and sarcasm – so that the initial nonsensical situation becomes increasingly meaningful and the various angles from which the action is approached combine to create the right perspective for the appreciation of the play.

The play represents, in fact, the convergence of two distinct lines often irreconcilable – Arabic poetic drama and Arabic avant- garde theatre. It will be necessary, therefore, to throw light on this unusual 'convergence'. Arabic poetic drama is almost as young as Arabic drama in general. It was born in the late 1920s and developed from Ahmad Shawqi's predominantly lyrical plays to the taut dramatic

structures of Salah Abdul-Saboor in the late 1960s. As a genre it was imported from the west following a period of adaptations and translations which created a need, and a public, for the theatre. Many of the early specimens were classical plays which dealt with foreign themes and were totally divorced from the reality of Egyptian life. Being mostly historical, they offered the average theatre-goer in Cairo a chance to enjoy and learn about European history without himself being involved. Daily life was one thing, the theatre another. The spectator who enjoyed a performance of a Shakespeare, a Racine or a Corneille (not to mention the various dramatizations of Dickens, Dumas and other major novelists) felt that the theatre presented an escape route into an alien past, completely unknown to him. It presented a kaleidoscope of passions clothed in a pompous language which, unused by him in speech or writing, was equally alien. Apart from the 'cabaret shows,' variously described as 'revues', 'variety shows', 'vaudevilles', or 'farces', but always masquerading as theatre in the streets of *Imad-el-din* and *Rode-el-Farag*, 'theatre' meant the presentation on the stage of the 'tales' (dramatized) of European kings and queens, knights and ladies, famous lovers, in a tradition of high morality, 'high' emotion, and to a great extent, melodrama.

The language of the translators was instrumental in the creation of this concept, and people enjoyed the bombastic utterances on, say, the principle that duty should come before love, as much as they enjoyed the dexterity of the great actors who delivered the harangues or writhed with emotion on the stage.

The post-war period perhaps accounts for this kind of 'grand' theatre as well as the excesses of the farcical shows of *Imad-el-Din* and *Rode-el-Farag*. 'Recreation' was needed by a war-weary world,

of course, and Egypt was no exception. However, engaged in a struggle for a new identity, she now also needed the grandeur of the classics to nourish her dream of reviving the glory of ancient Egypt and the early Moslem world at the same time. Classical as the themes and structures of the plays were, an undercurrent of romance ran through them which fed the new-born spirit of national liberation. Most valued and appreciated were the 'dramatized concepts' of self-sacrifice for a noble cause, devotion to duty, having absolute faith and, above all, patriotism.

Lyrical poetry, the mainstream of Arabic literature, was already turning away from the traditional themes of the ancients (the panegyrics, satires, elegies etc.) and imbibing the new spirit of romance. Even those poets who adhered to the traditional structures of Arabic classical verse now turned to 'nature', celebrated the powers of the individual mind (especially the imagination), dealt with 'characters and incidents from common life' in a language slightly 'deflated' or, at least, less conventionally poetic; and when they portrayed their dream of a new heaven and a new earth they still exhibited a heightened sense of the past. Their classical verse forms prevent us from regarding them as romantic poets, but a recognition of the romantic undercurrent in their work is essential to any approach to the birth of Arabic drama.

Ahmed Shawqi, the poet who introduced the genre in Arabic, had classical qualities which definitely outweighed his romanticism. Al`Aqqad, the exponent of the avowedly romantic Diwan school of poetry, attacked him for lacking "sincerity" (a hallowed romantic ideal), for writing about "things and people" rather than about himself, thereby not producing adequately "truthful" poetry of "experience".

Shawqi weathered the storm and, knowing that his genius was not subjective enough to placate his critics, proceeded to write drama – the most objective of all kinds of verse. Predominantly lyrical, his muse played havoc with his dramatic structure, often interfering with his 'characterization' even in a traditional sense, and often interrupting the otherwise even flow of the action.

With one exception Shawqi's plays are tragedies, their themes historical and their verse forms classical. But the spirit of romance, as summed up above, is eveywhere to be found. He aped the classicists in dealing with ancient history (like Shakespeare and Shaw he gave us a version of Cleopatra) but he switched his camera to more recent Arab and Egyptian history, thus setting the scene for a more native kind of theatre which has survived many revolutions of taste. Aziz Abaza's poetic drama which, following Shawqi's example, was mainly tragic and historical, was also more native and distinguished by better dramatic structure. Development was certainly in the direction of more dramatic, less lyrical plays; but no major works in this genre were produced for nearly two decades, until, that is, Salah Abdul-Saboor produced his masterpieces of the late 1960s.

By now, however, the world had almost left poetic drama behind. "Pinteresque" drama was already sweeping over London, while the Theatre of the Absurd, the Happening, the Theatre of Cruelty, and a host of other experimental forms held sway in America and on the Continent in the late 1950s and early 60s. Brecht was a poet and he wrote songs, but he is best remembered for his "alienation effect", for his straightforwardness and his didacticism. With the exception of Shakespeare and other classics, verse plays seemed to have abandoned the stage for ever. Nor was any aspiring dramatist using the medium

of verse. "Poetry of the theatre" was taking the place of poetic drama: metaphor had shifted from the single image to the dramatic situation, from the ideas of a character to the *idea* of a character, from what the characters *say* in a given scene to what the scene could be saying; and the rhythm of verse was now being replaced by a rhythm of action, or inaction – by the variety of feelings and complex moods which constitute modern drama.

The Egyptian theatre was sensitive to the change and it absorbed the new trends all the more quickly because of a certain indigenous tradition which corresponded to what the experimentalists were now doing. In village squares and at local cafes in rural areas a major form of entertainment is the bard – a local poet using the vernacular in telling the stories of ancient kings and heroes. The audience sit around him in a kind of auditorium similar to *the round* and *the pit,* now famous stage-forms in London. Not only do they respond verbally to the tale and the songs, but they actually take part in the performance by assuming a variety of roles – pre-arranged or impromptu. When in his *Night Traveller* Salah Abdul-Saboor introduced a narrator to relate and comment on the action, he was reviving an old native tradition as well as responding to a foreign form. And in *The Trial of an Unknown Man* Ismail combines the native tradition with the modern theatrical forms of the west, thus contributing to the avant-garde movement in Egypt a fresh and a new experiment.

Now the Egyptian avant-garde theatre, so young, has had a checkered history indeed. As a theatrical form it dates from director Karam Mutawi's *al-Farafir* (The Underlings) writen by Yusuf Idris and presented by the Egyptian National Theatre Company in 1964. Strangely enough, *al-Farafir* is essentially a straightforward,

commonsensical play: it had a clear message (social or socialist) and it managed to put it across, for all the innovations in directing it, smoothly though impressively. Regardless of its intrinsic value as a play, the production opened up new vistas for imaginative dramatists and directors. Having been firmly established as a literary genre, the theatre began to be used as a forum for airing and discussing social and national issues. The dominant themes of the early 1960s, variously handled in many plays, were: the problem of dictatorship, especially in newly independent states; social responsibility and individual conscience; and national liberation. To evade the censor's big knife (and it was quite big in those days) playwrights resorted to what is now popularly referred to as projection: a current situation, particularly if touching upon the ruler's or the government's inadequacy, would be projected onto an historical event, a domestic (apparently harmless) incident, or a fantastic situation. The audience were gradually 'trained' to read the political message – usually a criticism of the regime – in the historical, domestic or fantastic incident presented. As a footnote one should perhaps mention that this has grown into a malaise from which very few people have recovered: even after the regime has allowed a kind of formal opposition and opposition party newspapers where open criticism of the government may be printed, the average theatre-goer, especially among the intelligentsia, often looks for the relevance of the play's incidents and characters to current events and public figures, and is often disappointed if he cannot find such 'projections' or oblique references. In fact, if serious, a play is expected to touch upon national issues, possibly the problem of government (with the Head of State thrown in for good measure). With the humiliating defeat of the Arabs in the June 1967 war with Israel, and the general disenchantment with

politics and politicians, another kind of theatre came into its own – the commercial. Profit-making and recreation-oriented, it prospered throughout the post-June war period: it provided Egyptians with the farces they wanted and attracted still more audiences to the theatre – audiences that didn't care about 'projections' or about serious drama but simply wanted an 'evening out' and a 'good laugh'.

It was perhaps as a reaction away from this theatre that the avant-garde troupe was born. In inception it was designed to be experimental: it would present any and every theatrical form (provided the plays were good enough to be produced, of course) regardless of profit. Like other State theatrical companies (the *National*, the *New*, and the *Comedy*) it was run by professionals, often graduates of the Academy of Dramatic Arts, and closely supervised by a Board of Directors composed of eminent critics, playwrights and actors. It scored several sucesses by presenting *adaptations* of certain foreign plays of world renown (Peter Weiss's *Angola*, Strindberg's *Miss Julia,* etc.) and other local plays in which native traditions were dramatically revived to the best effect (*The Zar Beat, Ya Antar, Abu Zeid* etc.) Throughout the seventies the Avant-garde Troupe developed into a very respectable theatrical company, thanks to the inventiveness and originality of its director Samir el-Asfuri. With the recession of the experimental theatre world-wide, its character has recently changed so that its productions have varied from Shakespearean adaptations to modern off-beat native drama (though the 'projection' malaise dies hard).

This is, in short, the context of *The Trial of an Unknown Man.* Much as it owes to Arabic poetic drama, it must be read as avant-garde. It is a good specimen, I believe, of what the Arabic

avant-garde theatre has been doing in Egypt over the last decade, though its merits must lie not in its technical features, however fresh and vigorous, but primarily in the honest approach to Arab history as a living reality. Ismail's concept of the past is, as has been said, far from traditional: he sees it as a force of fate and makes use of it dramatically so that it emerges in the play as a force of doom. It rears an ugly head in the two instances taken from Arab history to threaten and frighten: there can be no conciliation with that awful force, and the only way to handle it is to defeat it. The unknown man (not Everyman but modern Arab man, as has been mentioned) is therefore confronted with an unknown enemy – an awesome enemy indeed. As defendant he is timeless: he has lived in this land for centuries and has for over a thousand years tried to 'know the truth', that is, to solve certain problems of government that have appeared insuperable because they are part of the tradition that has become part of his own make-up. The tradition comes to constitute a fateful force within him and, insofar as he has to fight that force, he must contend first with the linguistic forces that build up Arab traditions! He finds himself accused of being a romanticist, a spy, a traitor, etc.– common words in today's world but with dire consequences for the defendant. Political parlance taxes his comprehension in the extreme, and every time he tries to wriggle out of this situation he becomes more involved as a result of the abuse of political jargon.

The initial situation gives us in fact a striking example of such abuse by equating the defendant's desire to know the truth with espionage. He is accused of asking simple questions designed to 'confuse' the people and to know more about them – enough grounds for a charge of espionage? An absurdity? Not quite! For the defendant

is an intellectual; he has read ten thousand books; and he is trying to understand the meaning of the words now 'thrown in his face' by the Court. Should he go for simple definitions? Should he accept the court's definition of spy? Indeed, how do you define a spy? If the attempt to know the truth is synonymous with espionage then all knowledge is reprehensible, and any human activity based on that knowledge must be condemned – an absurdity, though not, in the context of the play, an absolute one. A spy is indeed a man who seeks the truth, the decisive factor being whether he has the *right* to know that particular truth or not. Well, does a man spying for his own country have that right? The dialectic of the play makes it a moot point, for it will hinge on your definition of 'right'. You certainly have a right to defend yourself and therefore must know the truth about your enemy; but who is to be defined in times of peace as enemy? A man (or a State) harbouring evil intentions, surely? But how do you know his intentions? By knowing the truth about him? By spying on him?

The argument is not as absurd as it sounds, and the absurdities that create the initial situation in fact reflect a reality of which we are painfully reminded every day in our part of the world. Dramatically carried to an extreme, they assume absurdist proportions in the play as we begin to be aware of the reality and the irony of the situation. But soon enough another irony unfolds: the judges – the whole Court – and the prosecutor come from the people. In the course of the trial language turns into burlesque – a parody of the inflated language of power – and their behaviour recalls the all too familiar court martials of today's world. When finally, towards the end of part I, the prosecutor (most voluble and ridiculous of court members) demands

the death sentence to be passed on the defendant, a mother enters who, in the tradition of Egyptian literature since the 1952 Revolution, clearly stands for the motherland. Again we are confronted with an anti-heroic situation. The chorus who represent not only the audience (as the author stipulates) but also the people at large, are indifferent to what happens in front of them: they are not helpless, but they simply watch in silence.

The people as 'indifferent hero', if not exactly as 'anti-hero', must seem a bitter pill to swallow for an audience brought up on the lofty-sounding ideals of poetic drama, but Ismail puts the point across brilliantly. Traditionally what happens on the stage must concern the author of the play, the director and perhaps the actors as well, but not the audience who are here to watch and be amused; so the man-in-the-audience sums their position early in the play:

We have come for a little entertainment!
This is a theatre, mister!
And those people are here to hear you,
To watch what you do;

And, later on, when Mother rebukes them for their cowardice, they simply accept her censure without comment: all they can say in defence is that if they did have a responsibility they had not been asked to bear it. They admit to being cowardly, powerless even to say anything to help the defendant in his strange predicament, but they are glib enough to state:

No free man can forget the man
Who blazed the trail of freedom!

The oppressed cannot forget the man
Who stood up to tyranny!

But they are not free, and they don't stand up to tyranny; they keep repeating 'we wish we would', 'we wish we could', thus reinforcing the irony of the initial situation.

As the rope tightens round the defendant's neck he sees his past extending into the future. He sees himself as one of the early Arab rebels who stood up to tyranny and lost their life in the process, but he is neither fully Abu Dharr nor Ibn Jubair – yet another irony! He chooses to live a past that he knows lives inside him, though his knowledge proves in the end to be his redeeming quality. It is his knowledge that makes him in the end declare that he is 'optimistic', that the 'case' has proved to be a hard nut to crack and that time is needed for a reconsideration.

Of the scenes from Arab history I have nothing to say: it is not the purpose of this introduction to present a full analysis but merely to throw light on the context and peculiar nature of this play. Of the translation, I may only say that I have tried to represent the various linguistic levels of the original Arabic and to be as faithful as I possibly could to the 'styles' used.

* * *

Sa'd El-Din Wahba's *Mosquito Bridge*

No account of the modern Arab theatre can be complete without a discussion of the realism of the 1960s in Egypt – a distinct wave which, though it did not survive the decade, had considerable influence on the development of dramatic art not only in Egypt but in the Arab world at large. It is that 'realism' in fact that we primarily have in mind when we refer to the modern dramatic revival in which Sa'd El-Din Wahba so prominently figures. It was thanks to his technical and linguistic virtuosity that the realistic trend was enriched with the symbolic undertones characteristic of the modern age; and it was his deep, penetrating insights into human life that gave his Egyptian drama a wider human significance.

Often bordering on 'naturalism', his peculiar brand of realism profited by the modernist styles of impressionistic structure, of juxtaposition, and the Chekhovian technique of exposing the frailty of human nature in snippets of dialogue which represent fleeting moments of consciousness occasionally breaking into the hinterland of the mind, sometimes capturing 'facts' of the unconscious. But it is for their dramatic freshness that Wahba's plays are still included in the repertory of the Egyptian National Theatre. A recent revival of one of his plays has shown that, more than twenty years later, what he does

with his 'material' on the stage continues to mean something to present-day audiences. As a critical criterion, relevance entails survival: and his work survives in different forms today – in the influence it has had on a new generation of playwrights, in the line of development taken by Arab drama in the post-realism era and, somewhat unexpectedly, in the neo-realism of the young film-makers and television script-writers over the last ten years. Believing in continuity, I have always thought that change is essential to maintaining any literary tradition. You cannot revive a literary trend in its original form, insofar as that form depends on conditions (social, cultural and literary) which are unrepeatable; but a modified form of the trend will be found to survive, if the art form is genuine enough, under the new conditions. Certain conditions were responsible, I have argued elsewhere (Introduction to *The Trial of an Unknown Man*, Cairo, 1985) for the rise and development of Arabic poetic drama in the 1920s and the avant-garde theatre much later; there were, similarly, certain conditions which necessitated the realism of the 1950s – a trend of which Wahba was the exponent par excellence. My contention is that we cannot possibly understand the rise of that realistic trend without reference to the conditions under which it thrived. The purpose of this introduction is not, therefore, to offer a critical appreciation of the work of Sa'd El-Din Wahba (as separate studies on major authors will be published in this series) but to provide a context in which *Mosquito Bridge* should be read.

A possible point of departure may be the statement on the parlous social conditions in Egypt made nearly forty years ago by the late Richard Crossman, then member of the 'Palestine Mission' visiting Cairo:

> In Cairo (Crossman writes) I could study an old-fashioned class war of feudal landlords and capitalists against peasants and workers, which was obviously developing towards a violent revolutionary situation. The revolutionary movement is still confused and formless, but it exists; and its objective is not merely the eviction of the British and the foreigners but the destruction of the present social system...
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> *Palestine Mission: A personal record,* London, 1946, p. 115.

In other words, the 'nationalist' sentiments were not, as is commonly believed, confined to the Egyptian aspirations to kick out the British and stem the Zionist tide: they were also provoked by the unjust social system and the 'unreal' democracy of the party system. That a potential revolutionary situation existed explains why the early realists tended to adopt the amorphous sentiments of rejection – amorphous because in the main negative and, if they contained positive elements at all, these were vague and idealistic. The intelligentsia battled against a system of government for which they had no clear substitute: it was an imported system, invested with the aura of modernity that Europe inspired, and it claimed to be ultra-democratic. The irony was that the intelligentsia, who were Western-educated, believed in the freedom of speech and sought a change in the same terms of the existing system. The revolution in the making (for the existence of which we have more than the evidence of Crossman) would not be Bolshevik in character, perhaps owing to the

general realization of the differnce between the situation in prerevolutionary Russia and that in Egypt, though it would strive to achieve certain goals usually associated with politics of the Left. Indeed, the leading members of the intelligentsia, and I have in mind the leading figures of the 'nationalist' movement, including such eminent writers as Abbas Mahmoud al-Aqqad, Taha Hussein and Muhammad Hussein Heykal, were plainly anticommunist.

This point is perhaps worth going into in some detail, in view of the tendency to relate 'realism' to what came to be termed 'Arab socialism' – a Nasserite invention never fully explained though generally believed to represent a modification of world 'socialism' which allowed a modicum of free enterprise (cryptically called 'nationalist capitalism') and a place for religion in society. At the time, however, there was a budding left-wing party though its limited political activity and limited circulations paper could not secure enough support within the educated classes.

Heykal, Hussein and Al-Aqqad belonged to different political parties but never differed over ideology; their only significant difference concerned the cultural identity of Egypt, that is, whether it belonged to the ancient Arab tradition which, over the centuries, came to include the legacy of ancient (Pharaonic) Egypt, or to Mediterranean culture. In literary criticism their major quarrel was between the Latin and Anglo-Saxon schools! In fact, insofar as the bulk of the educated came from the richer classes – the nascent bourgeoisie – this was not suprising; but a further change was yet to come. While Tewfiq al-Hakeem could, as early as the 1920s talk of a 'returning spirit' to Egypt in terms of the ancient Pharaonic myth of the reuniting in the other world of body and soul, the secular

atmosphere of the 1930s developed in the 1940s to allow the 'common man' to partake of the 'revival' and to pave the way for the emergence of a new consciousness of the common destiny of all Egyptians. It was the 'rise' of the common man, perhaps thanks to the establishment of an English-modelled romantic school in poetry (the Apollo Group) where the Wordsworthian ideal of the common man and everyday language reigned supreme, rather than any definite 'socialist' creed, that brought about the change. Already a new generation of short story writers and novelists were dealing with the problems of the working classes, the peasants and the down-trodden government employees (teachers, clerks etc). Inasmuch as they focused on non-heroic, non-historical and non-tragic themes they were realists; and insofar as they used the idiom of classical Arabic they were classicists. Hussein, Heykal and al-Aqqad themselves contributed to this trend, and the last was a self-avowed Wordsworthian. Classical Arabic was, however, a barrier of considerable proportions and it was up to the dramatists to tackle the problem of language; for classical Arabic was felt to separate literature from the people, and from the age in which it was written.

The problem of language is central to realism. While the novelists could adapt classical Arabic to accommodate the new literary forms introduced early in the century by the 'pioneers', the dramatists had quite a dilemma. As novelist, Tewfiq al-Hakeem forged his own brand of Arabic which preserved the grammar of the ancient language but changed the structure of the sentence and limited the vocabulary to such diction as was actually used by the educated classes in writing. But in his drama the formula did not seem to work. The classical Arabic used was no doubt 'controlled', but the tones were still those

of the written, not the spoken language. His dramas, with their predominantly intellectual themes and bourgeois characters, were more read than acted; in fact, Tewfiq al-Hakeem is rarely acted today, and it is significant that when in 1978 his *The Dilemma* was put on the stage by the Modern Theatre Troupe, someone was employed to 'translate' the classical Arabic of the play into the Egyptian dialect. It may be a paradox that the father of the realistic novel should belong to the classical Arabic drama of the early twentieth century; but then he was a pioneer and his closet dramas were translated into many modern European languages.

Now as the situation in Egypt naturally developed towards the 'revolution' Crossman had predicted, the dramatists felt they were called upon to play a more active role in the 'new era'. While the classical European drama which George Abyad,Youssef Wahbi and Aziz Eed had presented in translation to the Cairene audiences died down, the other kind – the farces and drawing-room comedies – which appealed to vaster sections of the population was still presented at one or two theatres. As light entertainment, the latter kind failed to make its mark as real drama, and most specimens were adaptations from the French. True, the common man was here, but he was more European than Egyptian, and the problems he encountered on the stage had nothing to do with the reality that every Egyptian knew. Both kinds were in fact felt to be alien to the actual conditions of the average theatre-goer and could only provide either an escape route to an alien past or to a world of fantasy. Neither could be related by any stretch of the imagination to the realistic short story that was now being written, or to the 'new poetry' being launched by a number of Iraqi and Egyptian poets at the same time. Long forgotten were the poetic

dramas of Ahmad Shawqi and Aziz Abaza, nor were the Shakespearean translations (and imitations) real substitutes. There was a real need now for the kind of realism that would bring the theatre into line with other literary genres – though there were other obstacles which needed more than individual efforts to surmount, such as the physical institution of the theatre itself. The first graduates from the now Higher Institute of Theatre Arts had already been active in the cinema, but graduates in the following years had limited work opportunities. University dramatic societies were naturally amateurish; and private theatrical companies were profit-oriented and loth to accept such 'high-brow' graduates. The early 1950s were a time of intense activity, not only for potential dramatists, but also for the potential physical theatrical institutions.

It was not, however, until the mid-1950s, well after the July 1952 *coup d'etat* had removed the monarchy, that the new theatre was born. An early 'play' presented by one of the newly- formed private companies (The Free Theatre Troupe, modelled on the French *Theatre Libre*) was an adaptation of a novel by Naguib Mahfouz, *Zuqaq al-Midaq* (Al-Midaq Cul-de-sac). I mention this adaptation in particular not only because of its realism, but because the performance summed up the problems and possible solutions of the aspirant dramatist. The 'play' was a success not on account of any intrinsic dramatic qualities but on account of its realism and such 'possible solutions'.

The adaptation preserved the typical Mahfouz situation which influenced many realists in the variety of literary genres now established in Arabic: a setting is chosen in one of the poor quarters of Cairo, with a number of characters whose histories are told in

individual chapters, even as the narrative line proceeds to a climax – a technique first introduced in Arabic by Taha Hussein in his *Stream of Days (al-Ayam),* an autobiographical 'novel'. There is no 'plot' in the traditional sense as the 'action' unfolds through the interaction of these characters and their reaction to external events, which in Mahfouz are almost always politico-social. Some of the typical Mahfouz themes are foreshadowed here: the decline and fall of individuals living in prerevolutionary days, the disintegration of social ties in sordid physical surroundings, and the struggle against the colonialists. The tragic elements are not developed 'dramatically' and they remain separate strains unified only by what the audience already knows about the historical background of the play. Indeed it was owing to Mahfouz's sense of humour, developed into comic situations in the dramatized version, that the play succeeded.

The play's importance is also due to the fact that it offered an avenue to a theatrical revival by showing that highly talented actors and actresses existed and could draw large audiences. There was now an alternative to work in the cinema for drama graduates; and the idea of having rounds of applause in Cairo's 'West End' appealed to all. Furthermore, as the play was not in classical Arabic, and as it tended to use the Cairene dialect studded with lively slang expressions (anathema to Mahfouz!) the players had a chance to display their acting abilities idiomatically: their movement, gesticulation and intonation were helped by the linguistic medium they used to present a close enough represenation of *real* life in Cairo. To have thus overcome the problem of language (the audiences were regaled with these true-to-life performances) was the second 'possible solution', the first of course being the setting up of a troupe of capable players.

Thematically, histrionically and linguistically, Realism was born.

Soon enough, the writers who had distinguished themselves in other literary genres were writing drama proper – with Nu'man Ashour turning away from the short story to the theatre and producing his first masterpiece, *People Downstairs*, round about the same time. Others who had suppressed their love for drama for lack of the right physical medium (Rashad Rushdie being a notable example) plucked up enough courage to write for the stage; and many more who had but shyly written light entertainment or for the radio (the only medium available then) felt bold enough to deal with serious subjects. The thematic unity of the new works has always struck me as indicative of the tendency to realism.

The themes of the many plays written in the late 1950s were in fact so similar that they must be seen as constituting a central current: over and over again we have characters from the lower orders of society trapped by indigence and the vices normally attributed to it, often faced with an external enemy (either their economic exploiters, that is, members of the ruling classes, or the British colonialists, or both) but otherwise perfect specimens of humanity. While poetic drama was temporarily thrown overboard, the theatrical tradition of the West was sifted through for those 'realistic' works which seemed capable of reinforcing the new trend. Nor could the new dramatists handle the common themes of modern European drama – the illusion- reality dialectic, the man-woman war, the conflict between past and present within the individual etc. With the exception of Rashad Rushdie, who drew his characters from the middle classes and would not contribute to the general 'movement', dramatists had the 'common man' for their model and the language actually spoken by him for their medium.

They seemed intent on making a case for the common man who, in the days of the monarchy, had been trampled underfoot by his oppressors.

The paradox of this realistic trend was that, according to the rulers, the case had already been won: the British had been kicked out, the Agrarian Reform Law had put an end to feudalism, and many other laws had been passed which, again according to the official statements published by the media, guaranteed the rights of the common people. It was an unusual kind of realism that dealt not with present-day reality but with a past one. It was advised by the censor that all such realistic plays be temporarily located in pre-revolutionary days: the use of the old flag in the setting was enough to indicate this and, therefore, to disarm the 'official' critic. In other words, we were required to believe that the military *coup d'etat* had at one stroke put an end to all forms of injustice – political, economic and social. However, the fact that playwrights were allowed to deal with the social system (which the audience knew had not drastically changed, nor could it possibly be expected to change overnight) was in itself a welcome change: Nu'man Ashour's *People Upstairs,* a sequel to his *People Downstairs*, illustrated this, and Sa'd Wahba's *Al-Mahroussa* introduced the audiences to the pleasures of originally written realistic drama.

With the introduction of television in Egypt in 1960, a major change took place. An energetic Minister of Culture, Dr. Abdul-Qadir Hatim, decided that a feasible way to enrich the new-born medium was to provide it with real drama, that is, with televised theatrical performances (naturally before the arrival of soap operas). Five troupes were created with the purpose of presenting plays – real, full-length dramatic works – at five different theatres, which would be

recorded for subsequent television broadcasting. This was a movement of unprecedented proportions, accompanied a couple of years later by the publication of a specialised *Theatre* magazine. The National Theatre Troupe had burst into sudden activity a few years previously and now competed, with its established dramatists, actors, directors, designers and music composers with the television troupes. The competition was, naturally, unfair; but it helped to create the right climate for what is commonly referred to today as the theatrical revival of the 1960s. It was in that climate that Sa'd Wahba succeeded in establishing his reputation as a master of realism and, later, as he does in *Mosquito Bridge*, as the playwright who could help the realistic trend overcome the 'realist' limitations first by what I called elsewhere a process of 'synthesis' (*The Theatre*, Cairo, 1964) which means the juxtaposition of diverse psychological moments in patterns suggestive of impressionism, and, secondly, by infusing a symbolic strain in his work which varies from one situation to the next, so that the 'shifting meanings' of the symbols become complementary and are unified in the end.

Wahba's technique is only superficially reminiscent of Chekhov's: instead of having characters living apart, though united by spatial and temporal factors, we have human links extending across individuals whose positions are often divergent. However, the comparison with Chekov is inevitable: the location here, the bridge, is by definition not a place but a link between two places. The fact that it becomes a meeting point for a motley crowd means that it has more or less the same significance for each. The characters are united not by their marginal existence (though a group is brought together by a desperate attempt to eke out a living both on the right and wrong sides of the law) but by frustration. It is their frustration, as human beings

incapable of self-fulfilment, that gives the bridge its negative symbolic character. They can cross it if they want; they can believe that beyond it must exist a land with the promise of a better life; but they are doomed to oscillation between two worlds, neither of which capable of fufilling their aspirations.

Now Wahba relies on individual differences between his characters to bring out dramatically the significance of their frustrated existence. While the use of 'theme and variation', as a musical technique, helps him to establish the human links I have just referred to (with the focus on identity), the referential power of his symbols ensures the relevance which, I have argued, is essential to the realistic drama of the period. To illustrate this we need go no farther than the opening scene where we have Ali spinning yarns about a conflict with a lion which is, obviously, untrue. We know he is a liar, and one character at least (a petty thief by the name of Nus) has doubts, but the peasants believe him. To employ this episode symbolically, Wahba punctuates the narrative with interjections by Abdul-Ahad, an old man 'waiting for Godot', about the power of the Lord and preordination. The two lines of verse he keeps repeating sum up his attitude:

The steps we take are preordained;
As preordained, they must be taken!

In other words, we must never contest the veracity of Ali because if we did we would be contesting the will of God – an extremely flimsy argument which is, however, found to be plausible enough by Ali's audience. This and Abd al-Ahad's other remarks prove to be ironical in the wider context of the play insofar as they indicate that the efforts made by the young patriots will misfire and that, as part of the general effort of the *Mosquito Bridge* people to fulfil themselves, the misfiring

is preordained. The obscurantist sentiments of the Sheikh represent in fact a sustained comment on the action: it is like hearing someone crying out loud 'Futile! Give up'. The fact that the Sheikh himself does not despair at all, insisting that his 'Godot' will arrive, gives the irony another twist. 'Something will turn up', he seems to be also saying but, as he Micawberishly trusts to fortune, does nothing to bring about a change. The story of killing the lion thus comes to assume a definite symbolic significance not only as an attempt by the mind to beat its own helplessness by creating an unreal world, but as indicating that there is in the real world a 'lion' not so easy to kill – the British lion, that is, the colonialist forces.

Not all symbols are obvious, however, and only by watching (or reading) the play as a whole can one grasp their real meaning. Khadra (which in Arabic means 'green' and is a first name rarely given to other than Egyptian girls) clearly stands for Egypt. Though this has come to constitute a tradition peculiar to the 1960s, the appeal to the vanity of individual actresses has been irresistible and has led to the survival of the tradition in one form or another: as recently as January 1986 Suhair al-Murshidi as Isis, in Tewfiq al-Hakeem's *Isis*, posed as Egypt and invited the comparison with previous players of the same role; and in 1984, Mohsinah Tewfiq's interpretation of the central role in Naguib Soroor's *Where Could I Find People* did the same thing. But Khadra is a woman and she falls in love and suffers genuinely enough. The poetic portrayal of Khadra in the early scenes is meant, however, to establish her symbolic significance which is sustained in the romantic tradition, that is, through the mother figure into which she develops towards the end. Aptly, the closing scene identifies the mother who has lost her son – a patriot forced by the police to fall into

the water and drown – with Khadra who loses her love, so that both are variations on the theme of frustration.

Khadra's episode has often been regarded as the main action of the play, but it is, for all intents and purposes, a variation on the central theme, and the relationship between the three young men yet another. High-minded and 'super-patriotic', the three young men decide to assassinate a political leader judged to be a traitor. As they cannot decide which of them should fire the 'gun', they toss for it. Sami does the actual shooting, but instead of killing the 'traitor' he hits an innocent passer-by who happens to be a supporter of a big family. This incident is regarded as central, I have suggested, because of its consequences for the 'plot', that is, because it completes the action – with Sami giving himself up without implicating any of his colleagues, and with Khadra finally being deserted. But look at it differently: isn't the stray bullet symbolic of the abortive efforts of that community and the futile endeavours of all idealistic young men in the country? Doesn't it link up with the refrain of the obscurantist Sheikh:

> *The steps we take are preordained;*
> *As preordained, they must be taken!*

In other words, Sami had to shoot the innocent victim! The shooting is inevitable; and it would continue. The fact that the bullets miss could not alter the situation where high-minded young men must resort to violence – uselessly or otherwise. Again, isn't the desertion of Khadra ironic and, therefore, symbolic of the failure of the Egyptians to reunite with their motherland even when most desirous to do so? And doesn't this link up with the long and patient waiting for

the arrival of the God-like power suggested by the name Abd al-Maugud (which literally means Servant of the Existent, i.e. God)? The irony is that we know that this God-like power will never arrive, just as the monkey (who simply opts out) will never come back! The sense of doom, suggested by the idea of preordination, pervades the play and gives the action definite ironic character.

And it is this irony, I believe, that gives the play its peculiar modernist flavour. The realism which seems to spring from the tradition established at the time is modified here by a tone which reflects not a simple disenchantment with a past supposed to have gone for ever, but a vision of a human situation that continues to have significance after the revolution. Consider the life of the two thieves – the professional robber and the petty pick-pocket – in relation to the idealistic patriots. The two outlaws not only have a happy ending, but actually achieve a rare moment of 'human attachment' as they 'discover' one another, with their new-found friendship proving to be a viable substitute to the drabness of life on the bridge. They walk out, glorying in their reconciliation, to a sordid reality. The irony of their happiness is matched only by the embrace between the mother and Khadra: the empty world of the bridge now rings with the echoes of departing people, with sounds of police shooting and would-be assassins' stray bullets, and, most important of all, with the reverberating tones of the Sheikh spelling the end as he too walks out.

It is for this reason that I tend to regard *Mosquito Bridge* as a play which makes use of realism in breaking the narrow confines of the realism of its time. In the final analysis it proves to be not so much a play about life in Egypt before the Revolution as about the life of man when deprived of his vital sense of direction, when forced by

conditions that are often insuperable to forge an existence between two worlds, both of them untenable. The bridge functions, in the end, not as a bridge to the future, as has elsewhere been argued, but as an ironic bridge, insofar as it bridges no gaps and connects present reality with no promise of a better alternative.

A concluding remark must be made about the colloquial language used by Wahba. The Arab reader will find it perhaps too Egyptian, steeped in the idiom of the spoken dialect; but the structures and images employed are a sheer joy to listen to: they are fresh and vigorous. This is unfortunately a feature that suffers in translation. However, the English text is far from uniform or abstract: it is quite lively and most readable.

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Sarhan's *Lady on the Throne.*

Samir Sarhan is an eminent playwright who shot to stardom with his second play*A King Looking for a Job* (*Fraud*, his first, has never been performed). *Sitt-el-Mulk*, his third, established him indisputably as a talented dramatist who profited greatly by his learning and academic training: he had by then obtained his Ph.D. and was teaching drama at the University of Cairo. His fourth play, *Rode el-Farag*, originally entitled *Potiphar's wife* – a modern reworking of the Biblical story – secured him a permanent place among the leading dramatists of today's Arab world.

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Sarhan's dramatic career dates as far back as his schooldays when he participated in the school's dramatic activities, at one time establishing a theatrical company of which he was manager and sole playwright. He simply loved the stage and, more often than not, life itself was his stage: he loved life passionately and saw the people around him as potential actors in a play. His dramatic imagination, so rich and creative, turned every incident, however banal to prosaic eyes, into a little drama – alive with his inveterate sense of humour and caricaturing mind. At university, he distinguished himself as a scholar, voraciously devouring world drama at the English

Department, but also participating in the literary activities outside the university. A famous literary circle, whose members met regularly at an ancient cafe in Giza Square, soon sucked him in. A teenager with little knowedge of the intricacies of the 'literary world', Sarhan managed to take part in their discussions, reading and commenting on their books, and, before he was 17, he had his first book published by an obscure publishing house. The life of the literati fascinated him no less than the stage – the Egyptian theatre still in its infancy, and its teething problems yet unresolved. The first part of his autobiography, *At the Café of Life*, recounts the story of that cafe and the subsequent struggle for a successful dramatic career in the 1960s, part of which is included in the *Autobiographical Note* which herein appears as chapter III.

Sarhan's development as a dramatist is significant for our purposes as it reflects the development of Egyptian drama since the 1960s. *Fraud*, unperformed and unpublished, was a play that epitomized the spirit of the 1960s, albeit with the 1980s equally present. At the time, every dramatist fell under the spell of Ibsen and the 'realists': a playwright was expected to 'write' a good deal, to use language liberally, expatiating on the 'past' of each character (with convolutions and revolutions) and impregnating the dialogue with symbolic undertones. 'Naturalism' was the vogue and people, brought up on the tradition of the novel and the short story, the two commonest literary forms at the time, wanted 'words' – and the 'closet drama' of Tewfik Al-Hakeem encouraged them to 'read' rather than 'watch' a play. Critics spoke of ' round' characters in Forster's terms. The radio producers with whom we dealt often insisted that even a radio play ought to have a 'rich dialogue' and a 'profound

conflict', by which they meant a 'literary' style and a 'fully developed' dramatic conflict, conceived even in Aristotelian terms. The actors too wanted words to fill the stage with – monologues to be delivered passionately, complete with one or two crescendos, and with after-pauses clearly marked for the applause. Resounding 'dramatic' phrases would be thrown in for good measure, and the actor felt on top of the world as he mouthed the phrases and repeated the marked phrase (pathetically or exultantly) three times in a crescendo to signal the applause.

It was in this tradition that *Fraud* was written. It was the kind of play designed to please the critics and the audience at once, but its intrinsic excellence suffered. It was realistic, in various places naturalistic, and it dealt with a serious subject freshly conceived and well thought out. The hero is a man who lives a lie: he can never come to terms with himself, yet expects the people to believe him. Having a shambles of a family life, he seeks fulfilment in public office. He cannot accept the prosaic life of his elder brother and fears the destiny of his father who has had more than his fair share of frustration and is now vegetating in a Cairo slum. Kamal, the hero of the play, falls in love, impossibly, with Nagiyyah, his sister-in-law, and stands for parliament but, for all the people's promises, fails to get a single vote, apart from his own. His tragic end is inevitable and the play is quite moving.

Fraud showed Samir Sarhan that he could imitate the masters of world drama successfully. It taught him, however, that when he wrote his own plays, he need not have an eye on the critics or on the audience. The plays he and I had collaborated on adapting or translating for the stage had been the workshop where he perfected his

technique; but it was the technique of the 'times', not his own, After several weeks of the rehearsals of *Fraud*, he left for the U.S. to do his Ph. D. and, mysteriously, the rehearsals stopped. As happened in my case (cf. my *Autobiographical Note*) no reason was given and he decided to put the play behind him.

Back in Cairo in 1968, Sarhan went to his writing again with fresh zeal. The result was *A King Looking for a Job* – a completely different play in so far as it struck a balance between what the critics and the audience expected, on the one hand, and what the playwright wanted to do on the other. The play is a fantasia given the flesh and blood of Egyptian reality, so that the relevance of the play could immediately be felt. The technique now developed greatly to make use of, mainly, impressionism – more in the Pirandello line than in any other recognizable garb. Though the framework appeared 'social' enough, with the disastrous news with which the play opens (drought has struck) affecting the entire nation, the 'conflict' in the drama is purely individual. The 'system' is simply corrupt, and the individuals living under it are inevitably either 'professional survivors' or 'hopelessly frustrated'. The action, which takes place both inside and outside the king's palace, reveals opposing pictures of life in that imaginary country (which the audience must identify as Egypt) with the emphasis on the private crises of a handful of characters, carefully chosen to create the kaleidoscope of shifting impressions. *A King Looking for a Job* was succesfully presented by Al-Hakeem Theatre Company (a public sector troupe) and ensured Sarhan's reputation as a leading dramatist.

As the 1970s dawned, the supremacy of the private sector companies began to be felt. The tendency to present musical comedies

was overgrowing and, as I have elsewhere remarked (cf. my *Autobiographical Note*), the trend was too powerful to be withstood. But Sarhan resisted it and went on, whilst teaching at Jiddah, Saudi Arabia, to write his own modern tragedy – *Al-Haakem bi-Amr Allah* (with the title later changed to *Sitt-el-Mulk*). Not only did he find his feet now, standing as he did on the solid ground of world drama traditions, but he also could develop his technique and his language drastically. As Elia Kazan has recently said in his *Autobiography* (London, 1988) he could give his audience 'part of his personal history' – those ideas and images that interminably jostled against each other in the sensitive mind of the playwright. Sarhan was now able to give us his original concept of that passion for changing the world which the innocent mind of a noble ruler could harbour, and the castastrophe it must lead to if unbridled by experience. The ruler could in effect be any other individual, and the fact that Sarhan chooses a ruler (Al-Haakem literally means ruler) does not change the basic situation: a dreamer of perfection, impelled by the natural impulse of man's ability to conquer every hindrance to happiness, is faced by a world of real men – men who are, though not necessarily bad, capable of evil as well as good. His contemplation of the central character's dilemma produces a 'master' tragic hero and a dramatic masterpiece.

Structurally, the play represents a development of Sarhan's practice, though still in the direction of his own version of classical drama – 'his own version' because, for all the 'classical' themes of the play, the structure is 'modern'. This is done by mixing two levels of experience at the base-line, as it were: the level of mother-earth, the mundane but wise and highly prolific power of woman, represented by Sitt-el-Mulk herself. Al-Haakem's sister (her name in Arabic

means Lady Sovereign): and the second that of evil – pure and simple – as represented dramatically in the character of Ismail Ibn Al-Durzy, the anarchist who claims that 'desire' is the great cannon of life, that man's twin passions (for money and sex) are really manifestations of his deep-rooted passion for 'power' – the survival law of existence. Each of the two levels functions poetically in presenting images or flashes of reality to a man utterly bewildered by a genuine thirst for certainty: and Al-Haakem, thrown in spite of himself into the sea of 'obstinate questionings', having discovered that his very first decision was wrong (the decision to kill Ibn Al-Nu'man) withdraws into himself, Hamlet-like, without a will to act, or the ability to take further decisions.

Al-Haakem's withdrawal marks a conflict parallel to the 'visible' dramatic famework of the action: the historical figure now assumes many guises and appears throughout as two people in one. The first is the ruler whose decisions and actions are difficult to explain, and who is often described as a madman; the second is the inner man who is baffled by the 'questionings' and is forced to nourish the impossible dream of putting right a world that is 'out of joint'. Hence the complexity of the central character in the play and the difficulty of regarding it as a simple reworking of historical material. What we see on the stage, or read in the written text, suggests not a ruler but Man – and his predicament is that he can never cross the barrier of experience to understand evil.

His 'inability' to deal with reality, which pushes him, as I have suggested, into 'worlds unrealized', makes him seek an alternative reality largely spun out of ideas and finally woven into a tissue of untenable abstractions. He begins to see things and hear things, all the

while obsessed with the need to do what no ordinary mortal can: change the world overnight. He now sees himself in every individual, trying to identify with ordinary people, now sees himself as above everybody, a man destined to control the lives of all, hence possessed of Godlike powers. He now believes it is impossible to know the truth (though assiduously working to reach it), now realizes that he has seen the truth, and that he is not only a 'chosen son' endowed with prophetic powers, but also a demiurge who can, once the world is destroyed, recreate a better, even a prefect world.

Al-Haakem's dream is therefore not unusual in being a great man's dream, but in stretching the limits of human possibility too much: other dreamers in the play are variations on the same theme, rather than 'foils'. Sitt-el-Mulk, for instance, accepts compromise, which in the beginning does not seem to do much harm: she accepts to sacrifice a little of her private life for the glory of the throne, making do with a sordid love affair in the dark corridors of the palace.Gradually, however, she turns into the mature mundane force of this life – the power that looms large at the opening of the play. We do not, in other words, follow the gradual demise of her dream: we face, from the start, a woman who is as part of this earth as a tree with its roots firmly implanted in the soil. Only when the action unfolds do we realize what sort of power she represents – after the passing away of the dream.

Other characters reinforce Al-Haakem's tragedy: Burguan and Al-Durzy share a mad dream; they try to realize it, but are destroyed in the process. Raydan holds on to the strange dream of bringing his father back to life, while Sandal, shocked by the realities of slave-life, dreams of an impossible liberations in a world of half-slaves. The

variations on the dream-theme are therefore complementary not only in themselves but also within the framework of the action, so that the play may be said to profit 'poetically' as well as dramatically from each variation. And in each case, the gap between reality and dream shatters the balance in the character's mind to the extent that, with the exception of Sitt-el-Mulk, each is defeated at the individual level before the whole set-up collapses with the burning of Cairo.

The sane voices the play are, of course, necessary: they are there – e.g. Al-Husayn Ibn Gawhar – to establish the necessary links with the solid world of reason to which Sitt-el-Mulk belongs. But they are smothered by the 'disturbance' generated by Al-Haakem, which Sarhan attributes in part to the medieval tradition as modified in Egypt by the Neo-Platonist philosophers – from *Ikhwan Al-Safa* (Brothers of Purity) downwards. The essence of that tradition in its Egyptian version is the immense responsibility of the ruler as sole arbiter on all matters, religious and secular; and the absolute power he has is uncontested by any individual or 'institution'. It is the authority he wields that makes it possible for him to order that an eminent judge like Ibn Al-Nu'man be executed at the beginning of the play and that Cairo be set ablaze in the end.

The historical image of Al-Haakem is here not so much modified as re-interpreted. Notorious in history as the mad ruler of the Fatimid Dynasty, he prohibited certain kinds of food (such as Mouloukhia - a popular Egyptian vegetable whose leaves are cut up and used in making a kind of green soup) and ordered people to work at night and sleep by day. History books do not specify the manner of his death: all historians can tell you is that he rode alone up the Mukattam hills and disappeared in the night. There is, in fact, a whole tradition of fables

linking his disappearance with the hallowed belief by some Fatimid sects that "Imam" Ali Ibn Abi Taleb will one day return, riding his white horse, to start the millennium. Other sects believe that certain "Imams" of the Fatimid dynasty will return (because they have disappeared miraculously) and that Al-Haakem may be one of them. "Imam" is an important word – and the name of this particular ruler is really a title which means The Ruler by the Command of God. In other words, he is "Godly" in the sense of having divine "connections", not merely divine powers like the European kings of the time. The only other play about him that I know of, by Ali Ahmad Bakatheer, maintains that historical image and, when it was performed by Youssef Wahbi, the great melodramatic actor-director, the audiences were thrilled by Al-Haakem's 'tantrums' and 'signs' of 'madness'.

Now Sarhan's re-interpretation is modern: he establishes the solid basis for his modern tragedy by giving his central character such 'obstinate questionings' as can drive anybody mad. He also surrounds him with people who alternately glorify and ridicule him: the power-seekers and venal characters of his entourage are motivated by low desires and work for his destruction, while Sitt-el-Mulk, the mother-earth figure, forces him in the end to die to save Egypt. He thus establishes the necessary continuum, historical as well as individual, for understanding present-day realities in Egypt and the Arab world, where the medieval image of the ruler persists side by side with that of the 'democratic' or 'modern' images. Sarhan has insisted that his play is a pure tragedy in the classical tradition (and certain critics have supported him, such as professor Abdul-Aziz Hammoudah) and that the social revelance must be minimized, if

mentioned at all. But the relevance is there, and to deny it is to deny a good reason for the success of the play on the stage. The fact that the audience applauded not the heroic or quasiheroic utterances of the characters, but those subtle dramatic nuances in the dialogue that revealed the dilemma of each character, meant that they responded 'correctly' to the play: they could sympathize both with the classical tragedy and with the 'social' sub-text. In the interval I was often approached and asked whether any man in that predicament could see his way out. 'But why does he bother so much about justice and certainty', a reviewer in a leading national daily asked me, 'no ruler cares, as far as I know, for these things!' It was remarks like that confirmed my suspicion that beneath the classical tragedy lay a 'problem play' – much as in *Hamlet* or *King Lear*.

A unique feature of the Arabic text, which regrettably must suffer in translation, is the original use of Arabic at three distinct levels. The first is the classical language of the great tradition, elevated enough to suit the moments of high tragedy and accurate enough to express the precise ideas of the medieval tradition; the second is the contemporary classical variety which has been adapted in the twentieth century for use in the modern branches of knowledge and the strictly defined, Egyptian dialect, used in conversation throughout the country. Sarhan's dexterity in switching from one level to another, in response to the shifting moods of the characters or to mark a shift in dramatic intensity from one point in the play to the next, is indeed unparalleled. I have not, I must admit, come across this feature of language elsewhere in Arabic drama: it is as much a sign of Sarhan's modernity as it testifies to his intense conciousness of the play's 'social relevance'. A 'pure' classical tragedy would never descend to the

level of the vernacular except, perhaps, in brief comic scenes (which are not so essential to the tragic spirit but generally added to provide comic relief). But here the low language is functional at the highest tragic level as well as the 'lowest' – when the 'tragic hero' sees himself as one of the people, identifying with the tragic sentiments of those gripped by his and the country's plight, his language turns smoothly into the vernacular, and his words flow naturally from the common well of communal feeling. The transition from the 'low' level of conversational Arabic, which is often at its shallowest in the street and the 'pub', to a profound dialogue in the palace concerning matters of state, is done effortlessly and naturally. The same words and structures are used but the feeling and the thought are intensified.

A final remark must be made about the common 'journalistic' classification of Egyptian dramatists today – and the 'category' to which Sarhan belongs. The flurry of dramatic activity in the 1960s, with which I have dealt elsewhere produced a number of playwrights who had been either short story writers, novelists or journalists. These are commonly regarded as the first generation of playwrights that followed the pioneers of the 19th century and early twentieth. As is well known, those pioneers were adaptors or translators, with the exception of Tewfik Al-Hakeem. The first generation of writers included Nu'man Ashour, Rashad Rushdi, Lutfi Al-Khuli, Mikhail Rouman, Sa'd El-Din Wahba, Alfred Farag, Yusuf Idris, and Abdul-Rahman Al-Sharqawi; less prolific, and coming slightly later, were Mahmoud Diab, Ali Salem, Naguib Soroor, Salah Abdul-Saboor, Bakr El-Sharqawi, Shawqi Abdul-Hakeem, Izzat Al-Ameer and Salah Rateb. My arrangement is haphazard and my list is far from exhaustive, as my intention is merely to mention the more prominent names. By and large, the general tendency was realistic (at times

naturalistic) and politically oriented. Some wrote verse drama (Al-Sharqawi and Abdul-Saboor) but the majority wrote in prose, occasionally experimenting with new forms and techniques.

That 'flurry of activity' ended for all practical purposes with the 1967 defeat: the hopes raised on the Revolution in the 1950s had been blasted and, as I have mentioned elsewhere (cf. *Autobiographical Note*) people wanted entertainment – comedies and farces and revues. Other names came to the fore in the private sector theatres which dominated the scene in the early 1970s, such as Samir Khafagi, Bahgat Qamar, Faysal Nada, Gamal Abdul Maqsoud, Lenin El-Ramli, Bahig Ismail and Ahmed Afifi. Some of the younger playwrights of the 1960s (who had one play at least performed) were away, either reading for a higher degree in Europe or teaching at some university or other in the Arab world, such as Fawzi Fahmi, Samir Sarhan, Abdul-Aziz Hammouda and Muhamed Enani. Their return to Egypt in the early seventies automatically meant a resumption of their dramatic career as they could only deal with the Public Sector companies which continued to foster serious drama. These were few in number and their budgets had shrunk considerably. By the mid-1970s a host of 'new' writers of mediocre talents (e.g. Ibrahim Al-Desouki, Fathi Salama, Muhammad Al-Feel) provided these theatres with texts, with a core of promising young dramatists such as Yusri El-Gindi, Abul-Ila El-Salamouni, Ra'fat El-Dowairi and Galal Abdul-Qawi. Strange things could be done in those days: definitely mediocre directors took over the management of the public sector theatres and presented anything they liked – 'on condition' it was definitely mediocre, of course! The return of the four people I referred to was, naturally, not welcomed by them and the four dramatists, each with a Ph. D., one

from the Soviet Union, two from the USA, the last from England, had to fight tooth and nail to get their plays accepted.

As happens elsewhere in the world, the press stepped in to dub the now mature dramatists the 'Ph. D. Bearers' and their writing 'Ph. D. Theatre'. And just like any other misnomer, these spurious and derogatory expressions caught on. The mediocres fought for survival at a time of political turmoil and general dearth of talent: it was not easy for them to accept a 'return' of real dramatists armed with knowledge, a wider range of vision, and greater depth of feeling. And, as it happens, all four 'learned' playwrights had not been 'active' politically in the 1960s – they were, in fact, opposed to the dictatorial rule of the cliques that later developed into 'powerblocks' which the post-1967 defeat 'trials' showed to be responsible for the defeat. As such, they were regarded as 'right wing' and branded by the press – now dominated by minor figures and hirelings (the bright ones had already left for the oil-rich Arab countries and Europe). Nor was it acceptable to those minor reviewers that writers should be both critics and writers. A famous journalist, who wrote novels and short stories of the worst kind, wrote at the time, "These learned dramatists are avid readers while we are professional writers: now if we allow the readers to become writers, we shall, I am sure, turn into readers?" An argument like that was, of course, scoffed at by all and sundry, but it was the kind that reflected the hostile climate we found ourselves in.

Though the situation has changed, with the many successful plays written by these four proving that learning has not 'damaged' their talents, the 'misnomer' persisted. However, no-one today could question the greatness of Sarhan as a dramatist in full possession of

his 'craft' and as a writer with many talents: he still writes brilliant criticism (of any literary genre) and fiction of an original kind, apart from drama. The play he is working on at the moment, *The Staff of Moses*, is similar to *Rode El-Farag* in being a reworking of Biblical material – but it owes to *Fraud* some of the basic concepts. For here, as there, there is a hero who is suddenly and unaccountably abandoned. It may be the mark of true genius to be 'left alone', even if you are ahead of everybody, as Matthew Arnold has repeatedly said, but the sense of being 'all alone' is sometimes too much for an individual to take. And this seems to be a theme running through all of Sarhan's work, even in *Sitt-el-Mulk* : is it, I wonder, a reflection of the feeling of this genuine, creative writer that, for all the love he is surrounded with and the great esteem he enjoys, he is still 'all alone'? I may be his closest friend, but there are regions in every man's mind 'where the beams of the sun never penetrate', as Wordsworth says, and I suspect that it must be in those regions that the image of the 'lonely genius' is lurking.

* * *

Poetic Disarray:

Un peu désordre, c'est l'art!

The Hijazi - Abdul-Saboor Thrust:
An Arabic 'Movement' is born.

The current confusion over the real character of the Arabic poetry written today (not only in Egypt, in fact) may be easily attributed to the use of a single adjective, 'modern' (Hadith), in qualifying the 'new' (Jadid) verse. Today's verse is unquestionably new: it differs drastically from that produced no more than two generations ago by the pre-revivalists – those late nineteenth-century obscure poets who maintained, in doggerel, the traditions of the Mameluki and Turkish periods – or even by the revivalists, that is, those who tried, often with success, to revive the tradition of ancient Arabic poetry, led by al-Barudi, Shawqi, Hafiz Ibrahim and Mutran (extensively dealt with by Badawi). One must admire the ability of a poet living in the twentieth century to write in the same way as his forefathers in the sixth and seventh centuries – and succeed! Their verse was published in *Al-Ahram*, and widely enjoyed by the elite. However, by 1930, as contacts with the West had enabled a different generation to read and translate English and French verse, new concepts came to be adopted and the efforts of a leading member of that generation came to fruition. Al-Aqqad's revolt was romantic, pure and simple, and the concepts he advocated could directly be traced to Wordsworth and Coleridge. He attacked poetic diction, personification, the oratorical tone

of the preceding generation, and insisted on the use of incidents from 'common life' in embodying the 'primal emotions of man': he adopted Wordsworth's definition of the poet, claiming that it had always existed in Arabic – the Arabic word for poet (sha'ir) simply means a 'man of feeling'. The cult of feeling is romantic enough, and the role of the poet as 'a man speaking to men' Wordsworthian. Al-Aqqad attacked Shawqi for not feeling deeply, or rather for not showing that he felt deeply. Adopting a 'public voice', Shawqi reassumed the position of the Arab poet in ancient Arabia, more than fourteen centuries before, al-Aqqad maintained. He wanted Shawqi and all poets to aspire to 'sincerity' as an ideal, to be truthful to their emotions even when objective, and one way of doing this, he suggested, was to abandon the stereotyped idiom of the imitators, in favour of everyday language.

The critical efforts of al-Aqqad, who led the 'dissenting' Diwan school (Shukri and al-Mazini being his partners) combined with the work of a number of Western-educated young poets to set the scene for a romantic movement, and the Apollo Group of the 1930s was born. Their work has been examined and foreign influences on it traced, though the continuity of the Apollo spirit has been largely neglected, primarily because of the revolution in form mounted by the New poets. Interest has been deflected from the poetry to the verse form, wrongly referred to as 'free verse', which came to dominate the literary world in the 1960s, following a long period of experimentation. It may be worth our while, therefore, to look at the salient innovations which thus blind us to the continuity.

As a new concept of poetry was adopted by the European educated generation of the 1950s, which simply developed the Apollo concept of the 1930s, the Arabic poem ceased to be an open-ended collection

of lines of equal length, sharing the same rhyme, with varing themes and became the record of an emotional experience in the modern sense, in lines of varying length, with a 'free' rhyme scheme, and a metre relying on the repetition of the same foot rather than on the traditional metrical structure where each line consisted of a fixed number of different (but occasionaly similar) feet, arranged according to an unalterable prescribed pattern. Modern ideas, such as 'organic' unity, 'development' etc. came to be adopted too, and the critical scene brimmed with notions never before acceptable in Arabic. The late Professor Muhammad Mandur introduced the concept of 'whispered verse' as opposed to the oratorical tone of the revivalists, and Professor Lewis Awad introduced T.S. Eliot to the Arabic reading public for the first time in the 1940s with the accent on 'stress rhythm', *vers libre*, and other new verse forms, putting some of the new ideas into practice in his own *Plutoland*. Though not primarily a critic of poetry, the late Professor Rashad Rushdi popularized the criticism of T. S. Eliot in the late 1950s and early 1960s to such an extent that no serious writer may be said to have escaped his influence (positively or negatively). Already poets who had studied English were showing willingness to experiment with the form of the Arabic poem – Ba-Kathir (Egypt), al-Sayyab and al-Mala'ikah (Iraq) – producing the first specimens of the new verse. At roughly the same time, Abdul-Saboor and Hijazi (Egypt) were undertaking similar experiments and the new form soon established itself.

The new form had 'modernist' elements, no doubt, and it did reflect the imagist ideal of 'composing in sequence of the musical phrase not in sequence of a metronome', as Flint had demanded – no mean achievement in itself– but it hardly heeded E. Pound's injunc-

tion: 'Don't chop your stuff into separate iambs. Don't make each line stop dead at the end, and then begin every next line with a heave'. One or two examples will illustrate this point:

A basketful of lemons
Under the biting beam of the sun;
A boy in doleful tones
Cries out loud, 'twenty for a penny!
'Take twenty for a penny!'

or the different

I leave my city
My old home,
Having thrown off the load
Of a painful life;
And under my garb
I hide my secret.
I buried it at the city gate,
Then had the starry sky for a garb.

The general prerformance successfully aspired to the imagist principles stated almost 50 years previously such as, to quote Pound again, 'to use no superfluous word, no adjective which (did) not reveal something', to 'go in fear of abstraction', to 'use either no ornament or good ornament'. The formal innovations were not confined to the prosody but, included a new poetic idiom and a fresh manner of writing. The example of T. S. Eliot was everpresent in the minds and ears of the pioneers, as testified by Abdul-Saboor himself.

The early 1960s was a time of special significance for all Arabs. National feeling was intense and a sense of general 'awakening' was in the air. The gloom of much European 'modernist' poetry, explained

not only in terms of the disillusionment of a whole generation with the War, with Western civilization, the social conditions obtaining in consequence, but also in terms of the 'New Philosophy' which banished God, was initially imported with the new forms and accepted as part of an alien, though fascinating, tradition. It soon became a literary vogue and, notwithstanding the genuine cheerfulness and the great hopes raised by the intelligentsia in the Revolution in the late 1950s comparable only to the climate of feeling in England created by the French Revolution ('France standing on the top of golden hours/ And human nature seeming born again'), the new poets wallowed in the imported bleakness, occasionally giving it the form of a romantic wistful melancholy. The gloom of the Western poet became an 'attitude', often affected but, strangely enough, sometimes genuinely embraced and transferred to local themes. Gradually, however, the bleakness gave way to poetic sadness of the purely romantic type: the despair gave way to hope, though the attitudinizing persisted. The surviving gloom in contemporary verse may be occasioned by the new depressing conditions in today's world, and Egypt is no exception, but its roots must be traced as far back as the first impact of the modernist European verse on the first generation of new poets.

The adoption and 'adaptation' of bleakness to local themes is best exemplified in the theme of the 'heartless city' which dominates Hijazi's first volume of verse and gives it its title. Just as Eliot does, Hijazi creates a persona and an objective scene, alive with symbolic undertones. Eliot sees the city as a mass of indistinguishable faces, and city men as people without souls, having surrendered their individuality to a vast man-made creature; and he relates the aridity of city life to spiritual aridity, thus pointing the way to salvation and, which is more im-

portant for our purposes, presupposing the possibility of salvation. True, Eliot uses a modernist technique, relying on the subtle shift of emphasis, the contrasting ironic and high serious tones and, above all, the objective rendering of the scene; but his basic *Waltanschauung* is romantic, maintaining as he does primal faith in man's inner power and elevating religious faith to a position of an indisputable Absolute. By crying 'Unreal City' he confirms man's ability to have a 'real' city, and his references to the cities of antiquity suggest that they were, in one important sense, 'real'. He 'zooms' in on individual cases of life in the city only to show that they need not be negative images of man's existence; and 'What the Thunder Said' concludes *The Waste Land* on an optimistic note.

But Hijazi is no Eliot: though benefiting by the 'objective' technique and the general dramatic framework, he modifies the position of his persona to become openly Wordsworthian. He confronts the city not as a place where he should belong, as Eliot does, but as a place where no real man can belong. The romantic streak in Eliot dominates the Hijazi scene, with the persona advancing to occupy the centre and become an alternative scene of action. So while Wordsworth places himself outside city 'walls', and greets the breeze in the 'glad preamble' to *The Prelude* as a symbol of liberation

> *A captive greets thee, coming from a house*
> *Of bondage, from yon City's walls set free*
> *A prison where he hath been long immured.*
>
> *Prel. 1905,i. 6-8.*

while he is relieved to be without a fixed dwelling place,

Now I am free, enfranchis'd and at large,
May fix my habitation where I will...
The earth is all before me: with a heart
Joyous, nor scar'd at its own liberty,
I look about, and should the guide I chuse
Be nothing better than a wandering cloud
I cannot miss my way.

Prel., 1805, i, 9-10, 15-19.

Hijazi places his persona within the city walls, and the voice heard is a thinly disguised personal one:

This is I and this
My city, at midnight!
A vast square and the walls,
A hill, appearing to disappear
Behind a hill.
A leaf circled in the wind,
Settling but vanishing in the streets.
A shadow melts, another extends,
In the eye of an intrusive, dull lamp,
Whose beam I stepped on,
Passing by, my heart overflowing
With a sad tune,
No sooner started than suppressed--
'Who are you? You there!'
Ah! the stupid guard cannot understand:
I have been kicked out of my room today,
Am lost, without a name.
This is I
And this – my city.

The counterpart is to be found, I believe, in Abdul-Saboor's 'Exo-

dus', a poem where the same theme is handled in terms of the flight of Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina. While a realistic scene, alive with symbolic details (with a tame ironic touch in the concluding lines) Abdul-Saboor's mythopoeic imagination turns the historical incident into a highly-charged emotional symbol. The scene in Abdul-Saboor becomes the individual himself, thus precluding the possibility of flight ('None is after me but my old self') – and the suggestion that it is also the flight of the Jews from Egypt that he has in mind (as confirmed by the title) lends support to this reading. The theme of departure is essentially romantic and, as W. H. Auden has convincingly shown in his *The Enchafed Flood*, a new note marks the romantic attitude in the nineteenth century, namely that 'an abiding destination is unknown even if it may exist'. Baudelaire's *Le Voyage*, with which Abdul-Saboor was well acquainted, has the famous lines:

Les vrais voyageurs sont ceux-la seuls qui partent
Pour partir; coeurs legers, semblables aux ballons,
De leur fatalite jamais ils ne s'ecartent,
Et, sans savoir pourquoi, disent toujours: Allons!

And Wordsworth wonders:

What dwelling place shall recieve me? In what vale
Shall be my harbour? Underneath what grove
Shall I take up my home, and what sweet stream
Shall with its murmur lull me to my rest?

Prel., 1805, i. 11-14.

though he knows that 'the earth is all before (him)' and that it should belong to him, just as the newly-created world had belonged to Adam and Eve, and the allusion is significant:

The world was all before them, where to choose

Their place of rest;

Paradise Lost, XII, 646-6

The romantic voyage is therefore to be undertaken for its own sake, and Abdul-Saboor accepts the theme with a slight modification. In his forced 'Exodus' from his "old self' he has to be certain of a land of promise (the 'promised land'), but in the course of the poem this proves to be merely visionary:

The pains of my journey
Are my purgatory,
And death in the desert
Perpetual resurrection:
If I die I shall live
In the city of light,
The city of wakefulness,
Brimming, beaming,
With the sun fixed at noontide;
Oh, my city of light!
My visionary city
Imbibing light,
My visionary city,
Exuding light!
Are you an illusion,
A mirage, taunting a traveller lost?
Or are you real?

The 'city of light' which now becomes 'visionary' is Medina: it is now transferred to a subjective level, gaining in symbolic value as an unattainable point in time. In other words it ceases to be a real city and becomes an idea, so that the real theme is now the flight from the past,

with the desert as the dominant image. Semiologically the desert is the Arabic equivalent of the sea, and Abdul-Saboor is only too conscious of this. In his *Sailing into Memory* the sea image is used in a modernist framework to indicate the impossibility of retrieving time; but both the irretrievable nature of time and the attempt to revisit it are romantic. Man, on his journey to Time is inevitably halted: the visit is typically interrupted by external forces which function as alien intruders on man's 'sacred privacy'. The 'halted traveller' image is central in Byron (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*) and Wordsworth (*The Prelude* and *The Excursion*); and the visitor- visited hero is essential to it. Like Wordsworth, Abdul-Saboor uses the imagery of light to stress the 'visionary' character of his quest, but unlike him, images of light function ironically to deepen the sense of loss, the darkness of the present. The city, in the course of the poem, becomes one of the 'spots of time' revisited by Wordsworth rather than an ancient city connected with a solid, established history. And the contrast with Byron's meditations on the past glory of the cities he visits can hardly be overemphasized: addressing the ocean, he declares:

> *Thy shores are empires, changed in all save thee–*
> *Assyria, Greece, Rome, Carthage, what are they?*
> Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, IV, 182

and, in recalling the past of some of these cities, the meaning of revisiting them is projected onto a 'meaningless' present.

Hijazi's and Abdul-Saboor's poems share another romantic theme which is again modified by the modernist impulse – alienation. It is sometimes recurrent enough to make us conclude that it is more modernist than romantic, but this is deceptive. For underneath that feeling there is a yearning for belonging and, as the behaviour of the ambiva-

lent imagery indicates, a craving for an attainable idea. And it is this ability to fall back on an ideal, or an absolute, that marks the romantic impulse, as Lovejoy has shown. There can be on better illustration of this than Abdul-Saboor's early 'Song for Cairo' which reads, in part:

Coming back to you, my city,
Is pilgrimage – O Wailing Wall!
Coming back to you, my city, is grief.
When through the darkness of the airport
I peered at your lights,
I knew I had been shackled
To the macadam roads,
To the squares in whose furnaces
The greenness of my days withers!
It is my fate, O opening wound,
That my return to you
With a thirsty soul,...
Should be my inspiration,
A hope that I should melt in you
At the end of time,
That the Nile, the islands,
The oil and the litter floating,
And the stones,
Should enshrine my broken bones,
Collected from the macadam roads,
From the corners of alleys and districts
Into an Egyptian-sycamore coffin!
Coming back to you, my city,
Wrenches my heart, pressing heaving,

Like desire, awe, and hunger!
Coming back to you purifies me–
A reunion of tears!
I love you my city...

I have argued elsewhere that this poem is a fine specimen of the New poetry, on acount of its complexity of feeling and 'polyphonic' structure, to use the term applied by Fletcher to the 'imagist' verse collected by Amy Lowel and published as early as 1915. I have pointed out the use of the ancient Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris and the symbolic undertones of its poetic application. I cite the above lines, however, to illustrate a different point, namely that belonging as an ideal was not abandoned by the New poets, that even though a reunion with the city should be an occasion for 'grief', for 'tears', for a complex emotion combining joy and sorrow, the certainty of belonging remains an ultimate end, for all the modification of the Wordsworthian image of the city, the modernist version maintains that hope and a certainty of unity.

Strangely, the traditionalist attack on the New poetry focused on the metrical innovations and ignored, almost totally, the changed concept of poetry responsible for them. The reason is that for all the 'classical' features of their verse, the traditionalists were romantic at heart, and had unconsciously accepted the English romantic poets as their immediate models. Their rejection of the 'modern' trend was partly motivated by their distrust of any 'form' that did not comply with their idea of poetry – the ancient definition of poetry being 'rhymed verse', pure and simple – partly because they opposed any new form which, if established, could detract from the 'grand' performance of the poets of antiquity or render them obsolete. They did not want a great and origi-

nal poet like al-Mutanabbi to sound antiquated or any of the revivalists (Ismail Sabri, Hifni Nassef on one end of the scale, and al-Barudi, Shawqi, Hafiz Ibrahim and Mutran on the other) to be given the place normally reserved for the 'ancient' poets in English, French or, worse still, Latin literature. But their attack, which included accusing the New poets of writing *vers libre*, prose poems or poetic prose, was too unsound to gain the support of the rising generation. Young poets of the 1960s knew that the New poetry, for all its metrical innovations, was not prose, and that its 'freer' rhyme scheme was more conducive to the producion of good poetry than the old, rigid rules of the traditionalists.

Though the days of the controversy are, in effect, over, the die-hard traditionalists continue to indite verses of the lowest order and to publish them in the national papers on public occasions (such as the Prophet's birthday, the National Day or, indeed, the victory of a local football club), or just to prove that they still exist. The trend has found supporters in a few editors of the literary departments in the magazines who advance theories based on non-literary considerations such as the need to consolidate Arab unity through the popularization of ancient linguistic and poetic styles, or to preserve the tradition of our ancestors, for the sake of preserving it. The style they seek to popularize could never, however, be identified with the original, fresh, and vigorous style created by the ancients for their world. Shawqi made great efforts to adapt it to ours; but the excellent versifiers who imitate Shawqi and the revivalists produce only a 'doughy mess' of third-hand Shawqi and fourth-hand Mutanabbi, 'blunted, half-melted, lumpy,' as Pound said of the poetry of the nineteenth century. The sentimentality which Ford Madox Hueffer had attacked in the poetry

of that period easily comes to the suface, and the conventional images of the panegyrics and satires have degenerated into cliches, the cliches into insipid verbiage. No wonder the Arab world is coming over consistently to the concepts of the New poetry, with most poets adopting the new verse. Indeed, individual poets have undertaken even bolder metrical innovations which, in spite of their mixed reception, have been studied in depth. The new frame of reference is no longer the poem written over a thousand years ago but the New poem written a few decades ago.

The paradox we live with today is, however, that the post Abdul-Saboor generation is moving away from 'Modernism', strictly defined, and advancing in directions which must be seen as essentially romantic, being variations of the modernist-adapted romantic formula of the first generation. The Arabic poetry of today, primarily in Egypt but elsewhere in the Arab world as well, seems to have but few links with the Modernism, not to say the Post-Modernism, of the West. One would be hard put to it to establish a relationship, however tenuous, between a popular Egyptian poet like F. Guwaida and P. Larkin. This is, of course, an extreme case of contrast; but various levels and kinds of contrast exist between the most modernist of contemporary Arabic poets in Egypt and their counterparts in Europe and America, from Laurie Lee and Stanley Kunitz to Andrew Motion. 'Modern' Arabic poetry, that is, both the recently produced and the new poetry, has developed a new idiom for itself which, in the case of some non-Egyptians (Adonis being an outstanding example) tends to favour ambiguity and the surrealistic image (at least the Post-impressionist image-making technique often confused with Surrealism), and in the case of most Egyptians, Neo-Romanticism. I have called it 'Neo-

Romantic' because the idiom of the second generation is easily related to that of the first with the ultimate reference to English and French romantic poets rather than to the European 'modern" poets who had influenced the work of the first generation. The gap which separates them from their contemporaries in Europe and America is too vast to allow any meaningful comparison: it certainly prevents us from regarding them as 'modern' in a European sense. The 'modernist' qualities they prossess are traceable, I have indicated, to the first generation, but they simply modify an inveterate romanticism. We are now able to recognize their real antecedents because the new form has stabilized; the sense of novelty it once had has worn off and the true character of the poetic material handled within that form is now easier to perceive.

* * *



Romantic Modernism:

Abdul-Saboor's *Sailing into Memory*

If the road to the work of the second generation of New poets lies across the work of the first, a brief examination of say, Salah Abdul-Saboor's last volume of verse, *Sailing into Memory,* must be helpful. The book, which appeared in 1979, two years before the poet's death, includes poems composed between 1973 and 1978 and arranged more or less chronologically. I have chosen it not simply because it is more representative or maturer: it has the advantage of being contemporary with most of the verse translated for this volume, and thus could refute the suggestion that it was the 1970s that produced the neo-romanticism – the 1970s being a 'dark' period, currently avoided in literary studies, often blamed for a decline in the arts owing to the loss of our old 'sense of purpose', and a general cultural decline. The volume is important for our purposes too, because it gives us a faithful picture of the wavering between Modernism and romanticism in Abdul-Saboor, as well as excellent specimens of the modernist-adapted romantic poem. Here is, to begin with, a modernist poem as advanced in technique as anything to be found in Pound; its title is 'Abstractions':

Abstraction I

A mood of yesterday
Is denied me today;
It gave me blissful sleep
And wakeful certainty. I could fall down
From the surface of weariness
To the bottom of forgetfulness,
Or rise from the bottom
Of forgetfulness
To the surface of weariness;
I heard no echoes
But the echoes heard me;
I touched no 'thing'
But things touched me,
Squeezed me into air, blowing
Into nothingness.
How heavy my body feels tonight,
How heavy my body feels.

Abstraction II

The sword of futility, falling
Between desire and action, unfolding
The desert and usefulness.
What can a scared mouse do, tottering
Between the sword and the desert?
Hypothesis One:
Can evade the sword of futility,
Opting for futile action;

Hypothesis Two:
Can escape from the desert of inaction
To the bottom of apathy
Only to face
The sword of futility. Hypothesis Three:
Can lie in the lap of futility
And apathy
And inaction
And die.

Abstraction III

O Lord!
You made me drink,
But when your wine seeped
Into the recesses of my soul
You sealed my lips,
And, here I am,
Stifled by silence,
And a lump in my throat –
My secret.

Obviously bold in its use of 'neo-metaphysical' imagery, the poem brings memories of Eliot's later period, the period of the *Quartets*, but is hardly 'imagist' in any common definition of the term. Indeed, the poem may be meant to be anti-imagist, as the title implies, and is deliberately provocative. The speaker begins by deploring the loss of a mood which had enabled him to over-come his sense of 'material existence', the consciousness of belonging to the physical world and, consequently, to attain the freedom of 'nothingness'. This is no doubt a

paradox and we have to accept it as *presupposed* : such was that strange mood that it enabled him to be conscious or unconscious at will: to be, also at will, a receiver or a giver and, in sum, to exist or cease to exist. Now he can feel his body, he is willy-nilly conscious of his physical existence as part of the material world, so that what he is deploring could be his loss of freedom.

The word 'abstraction' itself functions at two levels: it essentially describes the mood, the quality of experience, that enabled him to escape the physical world; but it also refers to his use of abstract words in building up his unusual framework of imagery. "Abstraction II" is decidedly Eliotic in rhythm – but only in rhythm. The sense of frustration channelled through the apparently Eliotic imagery relates the poem thematically to Larkin rather than Eliot, especially as the hope which Eliot saw for humanity in communion, so typically Wordsworthian, is now shattered. Even before it is spelt out in the concluding lines a sense of Larkinian death looms large and gives the poem its peculiar modernist flavour.

The quiet irony of the last part, the keynote of which is struck by the play on "O Lord!' (with a suppressed suggestion of the exclamatory 'God Lord!') serves to balance the high-seriousness of the first two and gives added meaning to speech-in-silence. The recognition of man's helplessness in the face of an 'almighty power' is translated into images of speech and silence, with the accent on the power of the Word (*logos*) which man, as an image of God, should be able to utter. But the image is deflated by the mundane, the all too mundane 'lump in my throat'. Put differently, the Word, as symbolic of creative power, which could have given man the status of a demiurge, is now suppressed: the silence which he is now forced to accept 'bespeaks'

his helplessness and confirms his loss of choice. It becomes an indirect comment on the human situation in general.

The same modernist strain could be heard in another, equally impressive poem, in spite of the romantic wistfulness that pervades the concluding lines. Its title is 'Summing Up':

She called me the sandy man,
I called her the green lady;
We met, in my twilight, called
On each other, in childish joy,
Rather shyly, made our acquaintance,
Fascinated, we groped the colour
Of each other, and shared a name.

We parted.
Oh! don't ask what happens to things
When they crack,
Or to the echoes
When they fall down
In the fearful silence.

* * *

And yet I remember that we
One evening did baffle
The scythe of the angel of death,
Stole away and, again,
Baffled the cock-crow of time,
To print on the wall of night
Two shapes, our shadows,
Two blended colours,

Spilt over the edge of a rumpled couch
And collapsed
Against the headrest of an armchair.
Now you watch me watch this painting
In my arid days and drink to it alone.

Oh pour a drink, please, for that painting.
It's my summing up.

The compactness, the solidity of the language, the sparing use of adjectives, all connect it with the mainstream of modernism, while the resolution of the 'action' into a single 'moment of meaning' shows how Abdul-Saboor could make use of a romantic device, namely the creation of metaphor through a few emotionally-charged words, which is not completely unkown to the modernists. The alternation of the modernist and romantic tones is so subtle in fact that it comes to constitute a 'modernist' device in itself. Initially, the process of alternation relies on ambiguity, then on metaphor, before the 'meaning' of the experience is allowed to come to the surface in the last four lines.

To begin with, what should we undestand by the 'sandy man'? Is it to do with the 'colour' only, as in the case of the 'green lady'? Or should it have something to do with the 'twilight' (line 3) and the 'arid days' of the coda? Indeed, the quality of being 'sandy' or 'of sands' must be called in question insofar as it is governed by the point of view: for all we know is that *she* called him that, just as *he* called her the green lady. Even if resolvable, the two points of view are kept apart to maintain the paradox resulting from the synaesthetic imagery (for, soon enough, their colours turn into tactile qualities which they 'grope').

The apocalyptic 'we parted' follows almost inevitably from the paradox, with a transition from the imagery of colour to imagery of sound. The echoes, now leaving the speaker in the silence of vacancy, turn once again to the re-creation of visual images, bringing to life the meaning of 'twilight', while the theme of the evening tryst and the struggle of the two lovers to evade the strictures of time and the Larkinian 'death' is developed . The shapes, the shadows, become *through the echoes* the blended colours of the contrasting emotions and the contrasting points of view. The resulting painting becomes itself an echo, reverberating outside time, in the 'fearful silence'.

The greatness of 'Summing Up' may be primarily due to the perfection of the romantic-modernist blend; in other poems the blend is not quite as dextrous and the resulting tone sets the work apart from the typical modernist poem. In 'Nightpiece' the technique and general theme could be easily related to modernism: there is the condensation, the power of the single, sustained metaphor, to channel the resignation, the sense of defeat, the bitterness of helplessnes and even the decidedly anti-romantic 'despair'; but the use of abstractions in the unrealized metaphors and the claustrophic subjectivity in the portrayal of the mood recall Coleridgian 'dejection' and the *fin-de-Siecle* decadent verse so vehemently attacked by the Imagists. The text is important because it represents a model often aped by the second generation of New poets, especially recent converts. Here is 'Nightpiece':

When I flutter alone
Inaudibly droning
In my jar of silence;
When I get entangled
In many a mesh

Of night's black web,
Waiting for the flow, or ebb
Of things to come;
I wonder how my burden of time
Could be relieved;
Should I hide in the memory
Of my rosy day of joy?
Should I gather the echoes
From among the silence?
Should I put together
The pieces of memory,
Of blood and water,
Of time drowned,
Of repose in the wisdom of days
Of sorrow blue,
Defeated,
Waiting for the mightier repose of death
Now that no news can reach me?

I have given it in full partly (of course) because it is short, partly because it must be read as a whole, representing as it does a single moment. The grammar helps to keep the particles of the experience together, as it does not in other poems included in this book. Some, like 'On Repetition', deal with ideas embraced because they are felt deeply, thus reviving the metaphysical strain already exploited by Eliot; others, which are predominantly romantic, such as 'Sailing into Memory', 'Fragments of a Common Sad Tale' And 'Verse and Ashes' rely on sensuous imagery, albeit made to fit unconventional moulds; but both categories deviate but little from the 'sound' grammatical struc-

tures of Arabic. It is in the dramatic 'Death-in-Between: a Dialogue' and 'Tale of the Sad Minstrel' that Abdul-Saboor uses a variety of grammatical devices in producing his Post-Impressionistic, and occasionally surrealistic, effects. The 'Grand Voice' in 'Death-in-Between' consists entirely of verses from the Quran, that is, 'sacred' prose, and is opposed by the 'humble voice' – the voice of man – which is 'conversational' and inevitably ungrammatical on occasion. The many voices used in the 'Tale of the Sad Minstrel' also vary their grammar to produce their effect. It is these two poems which I find most provocative, requiring further study by the Arabist.

* * *

Experimentation with tone:
Jaheen, Soroor and Qandeel

Though Salah Abdul-Saboor often makes use of 'wit', relying on sarcasm in producing his scathing satires as he does in his 'Tale of the Sad Minstrel', he rarely makes use of irony. He establishes his tone, which is never facetious, early enough in the poem and the reader is never in doubt about his meaning. The successful use of irony is to be found in the work of a man who belongs to Abdul-Saboor's generation, but who differs in using the vernacular, commonly described as Egyptian Arabic, and thus has fallen foul of the literary establishment and incurred the displeasure of the official literary historians – Salah Jaheen. A professional cartoonist, television script-writer, song-writer and poet, Jaheen has never won recognition by the official anthologies of Arabic verse, and suffers from critical neglect on account of his chosen linguistic medium – solely. However, he is undoubtedly one of the outstanding poets in today's Egypt: a whole generation of poets owe to him their poetic idiom, originally drawn by him from the language 'actually spoken by the people' and a lyricism that is unique in Arabic, standard and vernacular alike. It is not because of his 'realism' or lyricism, or, indeed, his vast popular appeal, however, that I regard him as worthy of inclusion in this book; it is rather, his tone which contrasts so sharply with the high-seriousness of the poets writing in

standard Arabic. Alone among the New poets, Jaheen can use irony to produce great effects of poetry, always keeping his tone under control and the theme in focus. Sometimes he produces limericks, sometimes epigrams, but often a new genre which is, for all its reliance on 'wit' or apparent frivolity, truly poetic and rich in 'human' material. The poems chosen represent various facets of his work which contrasts with Abdul-Saboor's. 'Graves' is fairly representative of his successful use of irony; here is the full text:

How I love graves – tombs so pretty!
A residential suburb
Of peace and quiet,
A beach so blue and breezes bright;
A wondrous sight!

Oh, then, walk and hear your footsteps
Echoing loud to feed your vanity:
There everybody's down
And only you are up!
Stop!
The flowers at your feet
Are either dying or dead:
Get your equipment then
And extract a perfume,
The elixir of humility;
Sell it about,
Distribute it and grow rich:
Trample the bones underfoot and philosophize,
Fill up books and be wise!
Your reward is piety and, well,

Many otherworldly gifts;
So read the scriptures there
And say a grand prayer!

So this is the reason
Why the graves I adore;
But a mind like mine,
Profane to the core,
The homes of the living, so fine
I love a little bit more!

Jaheen wastes no time: as early as the first stanza, the reader can grasp his theme and his tone. Life, celebrated not for anything that happens in it, nor for any specific qualities of the living, is the main theme; and the paradox of the dead being alive sets the tone. Unlike Gray (cf. *Elegy written in a Country Churchyard*) and unlike Wordsworth and Shelley (cf. the *Lucy* poems and *Alastor*) the stress is neither on the dead nor on nature: for Jaheen is not writing an elegy nor does he (though he ironically demands it of the reader) philosophize. The sarcastic adjectives of the first stanza are used, for the first time perhaps in Arabic literature, to build up a negative image: for almost every word unsays what it says – a rhetorical device inherited by the modern languages from Latin and revived by Milton for his *Paradise Lost.* But *occupatio*, as this device is termed, is not employed beyond the first stanza. The long 18-line passage maintains the ironic tone not through any specific technical devices but by remoulding the traditional attitude of reverence to the dead, insofar as the speaker *is* alive and must distance himself to an objective enough position, the key words being '...everybody's down/ And only you are up!' Not until the last stanza, however, with its neat rhyme and rhythm, are we allowed to

enjoy the poet's direct 'attack' – again through understatement, which is a potent instrument of the ironic mode.

While, not entirely unknown in ancient Arabic literature, irony – and the refinement of the language of satire in general – must be regarded as essentially modern. An ancient Arabic poet would be typically blunt; he felt no need for subtlety, preferring the frontal attack which often included the use of foul language (cf. the satires of Abu Tammaam, or indeed, al-Mutanabbi himself). In modern times, the ironic mode may be traced back to the pre-revivalist era when the famous wits of Cairo (*az-Zurafaa*) produced much witty verse which was either excluded from the 'serious' anthologies or relegated to obscure corners in their 'works'. A revivalist poet, Hafiz Ibrahim is known to have tried his hand at the genre, as did many others now regarded as marginal on account of their excessive use of 'wit' (such as Abdul-Hamid al-Deeb). With the revival of irony in the West, primarily in Pound and Eliot, the entire scene of English poetry seemed to change: irony became a poetic tool used not only in satire but also in transmitting poetic themes impossible to put across in the traditional idiom of the romantics. The translation of much foreign, mainly English and French, verse into Arabic secured a measure of 'respect' for this 'mode', but the genre remained suspect. Arabic poets approached it rather shyly, preferring direct satires. The exceptions are, therefore, important; and Salah Jaheen is joined in this area by another poet, better known for his dramatic career as actor-director-playwright, particularly for the introduction of an almost new literary genre – verse drama in the vernacular – Nageeb Soroor.

The extract I have included in this book comes from a very long poem in which he pillories the literati whose names are associated

with a certain Cairene cafe (Cafe Riche) and known to advocate social realism. In it he builds up a little dramatic scene where the speakers represent various aspects of their activity, shown to be anything but activity, and the title of the original 'Protocols of the Elders of Riche' is obviously a parody on the well known 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion'. Insofar as he does not offer any protocols but decrees, the title has been modified accordingly.

Though mainly distinguished as a poet by his tone, Nageeb Soroor represents a continuation of the line introduced and perfected by Abdul-Saboor, particularly regarding principles of form and imagery. One of the unfortunate consequences of this line, this type of poetic technique, is the freedom it accords the poet in buliding up his images and the far too complex metaphors he finds pleasure in constructing. Perhaps more metaphoric than other living languages, modern Arabic allows for far-fetched images to be accepted without questioning, and from the 'metaphoric idioms' of classical Arabic new metaphors are generated which may or may not relate to ancient use. The New poetry has therefore been a scene for the oddest possible images, for extravagant expression and shocking combinations of words. Many young poets in Egypt find it easy to ape the masters of the New 'school' without being accused of incomprehensibility. And this is most obvious in the work of those 'aspirants' who, without adequate training, linguistic, artistic or otherwise, produce poems which rely almost entirely on bizarre imagery which they could not have experienced emotionally or intellectually. One of these is Ali Qandeel who died a few years ago in a car accident. His untimely death was, of course, a disaster and he, by any standard, had promise. His work, posthumously published and hailed as metaphysical in a new key, is

the epitome of modern unintelligibility which derives from the power of the single image to blur, deliberately or not, the 'contours' of both feeling and idea. His major poem, which gives his only volume of verse its title, is 'The Rising Beings'. Sympathetically approached it may sound very modern, bordering on the 'metaphysical' and the profundity of thought expected of a great poet; but to the ears of the layman the poem will be at best 'difficult'. It is, again, very long, with no apparent links between the parts, no logical transitions or (naturally) a story line. I have therefore chosen only those parts which appeared coherent enough for my English translation.

It has been argued that this line could be related in its own obscure way to 'Symbolism', the true progenitor of Modernism; but how can we defend an image like the folowing one which 'inaugurates' the first volume of verse of Mujahid Abdul-Mun'im Mujahid:

My path was strewn,
O Spring of my love,
With your greenish eyes
That drank up the life of Cairo
Its noise and happiness!

This is not just bad; it is absurd, and the fashion has not died out. Some of the verse recently published in the current Egyptian weekly *al-Qahirah* (Cairo) is often a development of this tendency, albeit carried to an extreme of utter insipidity:

A Martial Fantasy:

A window between the hoofs of a moon
Stretching on the cushions of night lust,
Gathering a shadow on a scarred wall,
Baring a wind, carrying a cracked sword,

A cracked shield,
A head inhabited by horses
Exercising between pasture and fire.

The perpetrator of this is one Isam Abu Zayd, a 16 year old, strangely hailed as a talent of the future. But it is hardly Abdul-Saboor's fault that the rising generation writes in this manner; the disease could be traced as far back as the early 1960s when it took the form of a revolt against the all too logical imagery of the tradition.

* * *

Neo-Romantics:
Abu Sinnah, Shoosha and Guwaida

Having established the main variations of the modernist impulse in the New poetry, namely the romantic undercurrent in Abdul-Saboor, the ironic tone of Jaheen, the sarcasm of Soroor and the Surrealism of Qandeel, we may now advance to the Neo-romanticism of Farooq Shoosha, Muhammed Ibrahim Abu-Sinnah and Farooq Guwaida. They are grouped together, for all their individual differences, because they share the same poetic faith – a basic hope in man's ability to overcome his predicament through the recognition of truth, the power of feeling and the belief in the past; and I have called it Neo-romanticism because the movement represents a revival of the European romantic spirit which had informed the work of the Apollo Group in the 1930s – Ali Mahmoud Taha, Ibrahim Nagui and Abu-Shadi. However Modernist the poems may appear, especially in idiom and structure, the main emotions and ideas are romantic: they are easier to relate to Shelley and Byron than to Auden and Eliot or, indeed, to Gunn and Hughes. Shoosha's imagery is not too abstract; but his ideas are; and his generalizations reveal an interest in the universal standards (of truth, sincerity etc.) which Wordsworth had inherited from the eighteenth century. Abu-Sinnah shares the seminal preference for abstractions, but he decidedly has the ability to focus on

particular, concrete situations, elevated or idealized (or so he would have us believe) through generalization. Guwaida is equally interested in idealization and his work is dominated by the lyrical emotions of romanticism. A brief examination of their imagery may help to illustrate their differences.

Shoosha's name has been associated with the traditional Arabic aesthetic. His radio programme, 'Our Beautiful Language', has served to introduce the audience to the beauties of expression in classical Arabic; his anthologies of poems on love and mysticism (chosen mainly from the classics), and his television programme on 'Cultural Issues" have shown him to be a man of exceptionally refined taste and sound judgment. But he is a poet, first and foremost. His *Complete Works* has recently been published (1985), and the poems therein present us with an image of a poet who cares about his vocation more in Tennysonian than in Eliotic terms. The form he seems to favour is the longer poem where the mood is sustained through the musical technique of theme and variation. He has a favourite persona, too – a man disgusted by social ills and the road humanity has taken of late to the point of rejecting the entire modern age. He begins one of his poems with the typical:

About to fall in labyrinthine words,
In abysmal sorrow,
So vast, in deserts of the spirit,
I drift, am carried along
By a stupendous stream of our age's excrement;
I am pulled up by the roots,
Thrown in the face of time,
A trembling shadow, defeated,

Cold-whispered and – stabbed,
Defeated, exhausted and thoroughly crushed
In the embittered night.

The Shelleyan imagery may be necessary for the vehement passion, but the balance between emotion and image is not always maintained in Shoosha's work; and, insofar as the preponderance of either could lead to vagueness or to sentimentality (as Eliot has observed), we are rarely far from either extreme in him. He scales greater heights, to be sure, when he attempts one of the established genres (one of the poems chosen for this book is an elegy), and he has the ability to evoke mysterious worlds through the manipulation of highly evocative words. The peculiar charm of his verse is in effect due to this very quality: you are often carried along by the passion, especially as the sequence of the imagery creates a sense of urgency which is in itself an integral part of his metaphoric framework. This point will be clearer, perhaps, if we have a look at the elegy chosen for this book, which turns in the hands of Shoosha into a unique, magnificent love-song. At certain points in the poem the verse mellows and the grief turns into a poetic vision of today's world: the incantations of the opening turn in the last two parts into an original lament on the death of real feeling in this age. Here are the opening lines:

Was he a painter
Drenching in colour
The face of sad times?
Did he use for his oils
The heavy and weary hours
Until black merged
Into white and white merged

Into black, together projected
In forms and shapes uncouth?
Did he opt in the end to leave
In search of a prophecy
That played in the eyes
Of the day-crowned young?
Was it a prophecy of children
Yet to be born –
Who would perforce be born – at dawn,
Not night-orphans but a real breed of men
To foster his dream and unfold his tale –
The story bizzare
Of how he wore a clock of grandeur
And destroyed his painting kit
When his colours could not
Blot out the sorrow of the land
Or overpaint the blackness
Wherein human clay
In darkness lay?

The sustained painting imagery functions at two levels. The first is fairly obvious: man is continually trying to re-make the world through art, though reality consistently defeats his best attempts, and he inevitably surrenders in despair – a Modernist elegiac theme. The second is less obvious, perhaps, for painting itself becomes symbolic of man's perception and the paradox is that any man capable of real perception will be, according to the poet, eager to change what he sees but, naturally, helpless to do so. Therein lies the tragedy: the 'surfaces' betray an inward distortion, and one must reach for the

distortion if the surfaces are to be interpreted correctly. Digging deep in search of a meaning – for the typical romantic poet must search for a meaning – the artist will find that nothing could have a meaning beyond the human heart. Hence the note of hope struck in the concluding part; it is a consolation similar to that of the concluding lines of Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode', though in Shoosha it takes the form of a persistent dream which recalls the typical Shelley dream:

I dream of a beach
Where the strand still bears
The footprints of a couple merged into one,
A couple of words in a verse!

Like Shoosha, Abu Sinnah prefers the longer poem which, however, rarely exceeds a hundred lines. He differs, almost drastically, in his preference for the 'localized poem' in much the same way as a short story writer or a playwright prefers to have a definite spot for his action. He shares with Abdul-Saboor and the first generation the bitterness engendered by the 1967 defeat (in the third Arab-Israeli war) but rather than rely on the power of the rhythm and imagery as Shoosha does, he likes to re-enact the bitterness in verse. The title poem in an early volume (1969) sums up the meaning of defeat for him. It concludes with the lines:

O spring! if you happen to cross our path,
If your beautiful blue eyes
Glance through our tenements,
Give us a greeting of peace –
Leave it at our doorstep.
Should you want to reprimand us,

You'll get merely shy excuses;
For we sit here, crippled,
With no shadows
On the black dreary walls.
We may miss the colours and the light
But waiting for the departed to come back,
We still sit, impotent,
In the winter garden.

The defeat was essentially an occasion for soul-searching, for examining our position as a nation made to suffer, perhaps undeservedly, as a result of circumstances beyond our control. The paradox was that every Egyptian felt the predicament in larger proportions and with more intensity than expected because of the traditional sense of inner strength he has. Individuals felt betrayed by a leadership that claimed to be closer to them than any of their previous rulers – a leadership that had awakened in them a sense of national pride and made them expect a better fate. This accounts for the feeling the poet has of being a 'cripple', and for that strange sense of impotence. The success of the poem is due, I believe, to the fact that Abu Sinnah manages to transfer the external forces, which he felt had let him down, to nature. The social scene becomes a winter garden with a vague hope of the spring returning. The recurrence of the word 'perhaps' is central to the meaning of the poem: it is neither a poem of hope nor a poem of despair. It is one in which a sensitive mind wonders, Shelley-like, whether spring will come at all, even when he is certain that it must.

Writing on the second generation of New poets, Professor Lewis Awad has singled out Abu Sinnah for detailed discussion, focussing

on the 1967 defeat as responsible for the line of development taken by the whole generation. While the importance of the defeat cannot be overemphasized, most poets of the second generation seem to have beaten away its ghosts, especially as the 1970s gave them different things to worry about. So when ten years later (in 1979) Abu Sinnah published his *Meditations on Petrified Cities*, the earlier perplexity, the frustration and the sense of loss which followed from the defeat finally disappeared. In its place a confident poet makes heard a romantic voice crying over the future of his own city, Cairo. True, the idiom tends to be modernist here and there, but the sentiment is purely romantic. The melancholic strain is reminiscent of the wistfulness of Hijazi's *A Heartless City* and Abdul-Saboor's early *People in My Country*, but it derives essentially from Shelley: for the poet has a hope for Cairo, and for every "petrified City", every human community deprived of the essential human passions of love and kindness. From that collection I have included here 'Bloody Sights in an Indifferent City'.

The inveterate hope shared by Shoosha and Abu Sinnah is based on a belief in the original goodness of man. In poem after poem of the mature Abu Sinnah, this hope produces images of man battling against ills that are not irremediable: love emerges as the master passion, and seems to hold the key to salvation.

The main problem with the 'emotionalism' of the New poets is that it sometimes occludes our vision of truly modernist qualities in them, as it often does in the poetry of the no less prolific, and more popular, Farooq Guwaida. He has been described as the romantic poet par excellence, and has been attacked by the 'New Critics' as lacking in

depth, and by the traditionalists for adopting the new verse; but he weathered the storm and proceeded to write a verse drama, *A Vizier in Love*, using a combination of traditional and new verse (which met, however, with further objections), and he recently turned his hand to traditional verse with reasonable success. Though excluded from Awad's 1979 list of second generation Egyptian poets – perhaps because he had only few volumes of verse to his credit – Guwaida is most popular today both in Egypt and the Arab world at large. His sudden flowering of talent surprised many critics who were reluctant to alter their 'official' list of new poets; it also meant his isolation from the New verse school which had its roots, as I have shown, in the 1960s and embraced socialism as a creed. The youngest of the 'group', he never really belonged to it or recognized its 'supremacy'; but, deny as he might, his poetry does belong to the main line of neo-romanticism and the poems I have translated amply illustrate this.

Consider his treatment of the 'city' theme in 'The Heart I Had'. Apparently a true Wordsworthian, Guwaida manages to transcend the traditional approach and infuse an individual feeling of loneliness in the poem, easier to relate to modernist alienation than to romantic solitude. He also resorts to syntactic tricks in image-making, and I have done my best to reflect his Arabic syntax in English, though Arabic, like Latin, is an inflected language where syntax plays hardly any role at all in influencing the meaning. With poetry, however, meaning is never confined to 'prose sense' and, if a poet can make use of the fluidity of syntax which Arabic affords no less than English he can secure a measure of the 'enhancing suggestions' noted by Ricks in Milton. We need go no further than the opening stanza of that poem to realize this:

Shaken by the breath of winter sky
And clouds of smoke, stifling, awry,
Frightened, I flinch from Time – a phantom!

The grammar tells us that it was the poet who was both shaken and frightened; but look at the sequence: clouds of smoke, stifling, awry, frightened! The suggestion is made that the clouds could themselves be frightened, and the alternation of past and present participles suggests an interaction in the city between the stifled and the stifling; the clouds have been reduced to smoke, and can be seen as victims of the city. Like the poet's, their identity is in jeopardy. And consider the second stanza:

How Time speeds on
And life stands still
Puzzles my will
A day of pain gone
Another of despondency

The Shakespearean echo functions in both directions: though the 'normal' subject of 'puzzles' is in the previous two lines, another subject may be seen in the following two. The trick is not deliberate, I believe, insofar as the poet employs an impressionistic technique quite common in modernist poetry. The third stanza, for instance, has no finite verb at all:

Oh for a moment of time's uncharted sea,
A pre-wedding day of my city,
The odour of her innocence in the air,
Her master light, so bright,
Shining on the river, shy and diffident.
So different.

Are we not entitled to ask what it was that was shy, diffident and different? The light, the river or the city? The epithets may apply to all three, and they may, in effect, be applicable to other things in the stanza – the moment of Time's 'uncharted sea', the joy, the odour or the innocence. It is a stanza of identification, of synaesthetic imagery, that is, of images which correspond internally by cross-referring to one another and by applying to a central entity – the city.

Guwaida also uses structural tricks in establishing his unity of theme and impression. The theme of 'stifling' for instance is repeated with variation throughout to create a central paradox of life and death. So in stanza 4 the image reappears in terms of 'choking', of breathing suspended to unleash a voice within or a visionary voice from the past. This is further developed until in the end it is resolved in the poet's inability to talk at all.

'Waiting for the Train' is a similar poem where the romantic impulse creates a 'romantic' atmosphere, to use Coleridge's term, which helps to transfer the physical incident to a mental plane, so that the whole experience may be read as an abstraction, a state of mind. In his later work this peculiar brand of romanticism gives birth to an original tone which makes Guwaida stand alone among his contemporaries. Though he tends to prefer the longer poem nowadays, like Shoosha and Abu Sinnah, this tone distinguishes him from them.

* * *

Symbolists, Absurdists, Allegorists, Classicists, and Mavericks:

There are other varieties of neo-romanticism which could be related to Abdul-Saboor's version of the modernist-romantic poem, such as the use of incidents or characters from Arab history in seeking fresh interpretations of the present. Sometimes allegory is used, sometimes parables; but the 'norm' is the projection of the past onto the present in the attempt to get a message across. Just as Abdul-Saboor used in his 'Tale of the Sad Minstrel' the traditional image of the Arab Court poet to declare his condemnation of the military establishment responsible for the Arab defeat in 1967, Amal Donqol uses 'tales', incidents and characters from Arab history in declaring his rejection of the political line adopted in the 1970s, culminating as it did in the Egyptian peace accord with Israel. With such a political message, he was easily popular, especially because of the 'personal legend' he created for himself. Like Shoosha and Ahmed Suwailam, Donqol relies heavily on the ability of the original combinations of Arabic words to evoke rhythms of ancient Arabic poetry; his verse is very pleasing to hear but it suffers most in translation.

A typical poem is 'Crying before Zarqa al-Yamama'. Zarqa was a sharp-eyed girl traditionally noted for sighting the advance of an

invading army which held up tree branches for camouflage, and is therefore used as symbolic of the vatic powers of the poet. As nobody in al-Yamama, a region in Arabia (and a tribe), heeded her warning, so Donqol would claim that a poet's oracular utterances might fall on deaf ears – in this case Donqol himself warning the rulers of the land. Like Abdul-Saboor's, the poem condemns those responsible for the defeat, but it differs in making a specific accusation. For Donqol objects in no ambiguous terms to sacrificing the 'common man', the speaker being such a character, in the war with Israel. Being poor, never a master of his fate and consistently exploited by those at the top, the speaker thus addresses Zarqa:

O sacred prophetess!
Break your silence!
You have been silent year after year,
To ensure my safety.
'Shut up', they said,
And I was quiet and blind.
Acquiescing in a leadership of eunuchs!
I stayed behind, among the slaves of my tribe
To guard our flocks,
To shear the wool,
To keep the she-camels in the fold,
Myself asleep in the fold of oblivion,
My food: a crust of bread and water
And some dried dates.
And here I am,
In the thick of fighting, called up,
When the swordsmen, the archers and the knights

Had flinched!
I, who never ate mutton,
Never had power,
Was of no consequence,
Banished from the councils of aldermen,
Now invited to die
Though not to parley with the men!

In the cirles of the literati (and such circles do exist in Egypt, though more importantly in Syria and Iraq) Donqol is regarded as a great poet mainly on account of his rejection of peace with Israel. His topicality has, however, its dangers, and a good poem like 'Make no Peace!' could fall flat on someone who may want peace. Living a life which he wanted to appear as similar as possible to that of the 'vagrant' Arab poets of the seventh and eighth centuries A.D., he succeeded in creating a new image of the 'pauper-poet' – a man with a message, who cares little about the temptations of public life or glory but who would die for a cause. In this book I have included three poems from his first three volumes 'Moon Murder', 'Crying Before Zarqa al-Yamama' and 'A Comment on Current Events' (one from each). His fourth volume *Future Testament* relies heavily on Biblical images and uses too many Biblical symbols, all employed to serve his main political purposes.

Another variety is the allegorical poem which is sometimes given the flesh and blood of realistic action, sometimes presented as a parable. Ms. Wafaa Wagdy has excelled in this and, as a faithful disciple of Abdul-Saboor, has inherited the modernist-romantic blend, though the romanticism often outweighs the modernism. Her peculiar achievement is to be found, however, in a genre she seems to develop

almost independently: the short allegorical (or symbolic) poem. Her 'Blood Wedding' is a good example of this. It was directly inspired by the 1967 defeat when the Arab celebration of a would-be victory turned into a stunning catastrophe. She does not, however, refer to that political 'occasion' at all, nor does she suggest that her poem has any wider significance, social or psychological. The common Egyptian practice of firing shots (usually from a shotgun) at a wedding as an expression of joy is usually condemned as it sometimes results in casualties among the guests – and Wafaa Wagdy uses this allegorically, making the victim this time the bride herself, so that she can be easily identified with an abstraction such as national pride or dignity or even with Egypt herself. 'Two Rumour Poems' may be seen to belong to the same genre but are superior in not being so topical. From her first volume of verse I have included 'A Vision of the Wound', which is original in its handling of the theme of dying love, particularly in its reversed symbolism. The speaker assumes a position of a woman who can, through her intrinsic creative power, regenerate the heart of a man who apparently had ceased to harbour the old affection for her. Mrs. Wagdy can become exceptionally lyrical when she sings the beauty of a faithful relationship as she does in 'Seven-Day Sonata'.

The allegorical (or symbolic) line is always fraught with the danger of obscurity and, while Mrs Wagdy is consistently lucid, others are not. Muhammad Afifi Matar has experiments in it which relate him to the popular tradition, full as it is with elements of the 'absurd'. Matar's use of the 'absurd' connects him not with the 'folk' tradition, strictly defined, but with the 'literary' use of the absurd in *Kunstpoesie*

from William Blake to Ted Hughes. The poem I have chosen illustrates his use of animal symbolism in capturing the inscrutable sense of release that accompanies every 'genuine' love experience – the mysterious freedom engendered by the unity of man and woman. The colt is both a 'baby' horse and a wild spirit; and the pristine freedom is almost pagan, with the images creating an enigmatic, almost surrealistic atmosphere which deepens the sense of mystery.

Critics have been attracted to the implication that the colt represents a spirit of anarchy which, even if celebrated in itself, disrupts the free-flowing stream of ordinary life. This possible 'philosophical' implication often appears to give 'profundity' to the verse; but the poem is original and novel enough to require no aid from 'philosophy'.

Sometimes the poets themselves invite a 'philosopical' approach, especially that the New poets, fascinated by the apparent 'depth' of Modernist verse, use the jargon of the philosophers without fully realizing their significance. Like the 'surrealist' image, this tendency is to be found most in the young who 'imitate' the translated verses they read in the current magazines; but even the 'elders' do so on occasion. Not so Ahmed Suwailam who is represented by a poem that is profound without being 'philosophical'. 'Holes' is a straightforward poem although it deals with the 'neo-metaphysical' theme of subject-object relationship.

Suwailam employs a central metaphor, namely that man's senses (metaphorically seen as chinks in his armour) make him vulnerable to intrusion by external reality, in building up a dialectic between subject

and object where both thesis and antithesis are valid. The poem is therefore to be read both in terms of Coleridge's 'coalescence of subject and object' and within the general framework of Wordsworth's mind-world dialectic.

Variations of the romantic impulse may be found which have little or nothing to do with the 1967 defeat which seems to preoccupy a whole generation. Indeed, there are individual voices which owe little to Abdul-Saboor or to the New poetry as an artistic trend; some proceed directly from the Tradition, having absorbed the Modernist trend, and so escape Abdul-Saboor's influence altogether, such as Sa'd Darweesh, Ahmed Heykal and Malak Abdul-Aziz. Others have been original enough to stand outside the mainstream of the New poetry, even if they share the second generation, such as Fathi Said and Nassar Abdullah. There are even those whose intellectual background connects them directly with the European romanticism of the mid-nineteenth century, and, in the case of Izz El-Din Ismail, with the Modernism of the early twentieth.

Ismail is a special case, for while his spirit is modernist, his idiom is romantic – an Abdul-Saboor in reverse. I have often thought that he, a man of vast knowledge, must be using the romantic idiom deliberately to establish a familiar framework (for the romantic-trained Arab reader) for his 'unfamiliar' modernist vision. Consider his 'Voyage': the title and opening stanza are drenched in the idiom of every true romantic, and Shelley is immediately recalled; but you discover soon enough that the speaker is a persona like those of *The Waste Land,* and the point is brought home in the key stanza:

The candle lit on the road
Saw a procession of phantoms,

Both men and women passed by –
But not a single brow shone
No tears dimmed an eye!
When I called on them, 'You there!
'Have you not seen my lamp gleaming,
'The oil within, light from my eyes, burning?'

which recalls the famous scene in Eliot – the crowd flowing over the bridge and one character declaring 'there I saw one I knew' – though the walking dead are already phantoms in Ismail. The real affinities are with Tennyson's *Ulysses*, though, again, the theme is modified to suggest a journey more spiritual than physical, as the last stanza makes clear. The actual voice of the poet commenting on his character's departure has the same function as that of Eliot's commentary, but it is even more advanced in that it makes us aware that the persona does not belong to our age, that his 'sentimentality' conceals an idealism which is sorely missed in today's world and that, whether you accept it or not, it must be seen as representing a fast vanishing human stance.

The use of personae in Ismail may be confusing. It has prevented many critics from grasping the real character of his verse, but it is to be related to his dramatic bent of mind, and his passion for varying his style, drawing on the indefatiguable resources of Arabic, to embody various moods of contemporary man. As he has shown in *The Trial of an Unknown Man*, Ismail is at his best when he uses style as an instrument of characterization – a unique privilege, thanks to his expert knowledge of Arabic.

The poems representing Fathi Said reveal a dominant romantic impulse which is decidedly behind the image he created for the poet in

his famous volume *But not Poetry, My Lord!* The two poems chosen for this volume are merely introductory, as the poet has many voices and shares with Ismail (as with Guwaida, Suwailam, Abu Sinnah and Wagdy) the interest in drama.

Of the rest of the poets represented in this first volume little need be said: their poems speak for themselves. Their romanticism often comes to the surface and is often thinly disguised by the New verse form. Nassar Abdullah uses deceptively modernist idiom, drawing on apparently 'metaphysical' ideas, but is plainly romantic: his subjectivity is hardly disguised by his 'objective' images and his firm faith in man's heart never suffers from the melancholic strain which pervades his work. Though different, in using the 'received' (if not exactly 'standard') images of the romantics, Ahmed Heykal's verse makes no bones about declaring the same firm faith; he delights in C. Day-Lewis's 'consecrated images' and often resorts to them in declaring his anti-modernist optimism. Heykal tried his hand at the New poetry, he tells us in his introduction to his only volume of verse *Echoes of the Flute*, when it was in vogue; but, essentially, he is a traditionalist. Images of nature are common to both modernists and romanticists, of course, but it is what you make of them that gives the verse its peculiar romantic flavour; and Malak Abdul-Aziz is no exception. In her tribute to Taha Hussein, 'The Mountain', she reveals a deep-seated romantic bent of mind. She is almost consistently free of the affected myth-making that characterizes much of the New poetry, and she differs from the rising generation in insisting on the 'pure' image, that is, the image as an emotional-intellectual amalgam untainted by allusion to pagan or Christian mythology. Not so Maxime Farag Maxime, however, who freely uses Christian images

which are not fully realized. The use of the 'cross', crucifixion, the theme of Judas etc. was so common in the New poetry at one time that poets could not be blamed for accepting them as part of the poetic idiom of the New verse. The tendency is fast dying out, at any rate, and if traces of it are to be found, they are, in the main, genuine.

* * *

River Tattoos on Bodily Charts

(Fourth Tattoo)

[Do you dream? The sun is shining

In the ballads screaming,

The river is hiding,

Whispering under your bed,

And slumber,

Is the sluice

Through which your dumb

Inheritance flows.]

Muhammed Afifi Matar

I saw you rise,
And I saw the sun of tears rise
Behind the garb of your hair,
With noontide erect, a palmtree
Tattooed in air,
A dream space,
With the ballads checked,
Gateways to your land.
Young horses alienated in a range
Of green wonder,
And a teenager sea a rose burgeoning
To instincts foaming,
The fabled bridal glow.
A winged mare galloping
To a horizon bed,
Three Water creatures
With softness embridled
Open the bridges on top of the litter,
Pouring bodies into bodies.

The Sun of tears rise,
And in your temples,
The captive birds have nestled;
Your eternal silence
Is the bread waiting to be eaten;
Your steps are an inscription,

Eternally moving,

On the swarthy flesh

Of words.[1]

You have taken primordial matter by force

For a wife,

Then gave her back as words

In the holy writ to unbounded space,

While, in the depth of darkness

You emerge as a phantom light

Brightening up the wayward parts

Of a body compressing all seasons,

Brightening, render the rotundities of the breasts,

The barns full of corn,

The ballads full of green horses,-

And establishing in her crude passion

A house and a kingdom for all foundlings,

While you remain the throne of sleep in her limbs.

She wore you when bare,

But you ran in her parts,

Left in every palm a tree of corn mills,

And included in the marriage papers

A charm for bread and blessings.

* * *

The covey of palm doves,

Colourful and sun-surprised,

Whirled in the bright space.

The circles overlapped,
With an inscription, spelling out a rose
And an ear of corn forming on the calm horizon,
Then, ascending, a crown
For the kingdom of extended spaces.
The circles were then surprised
By the tapestry of corn,
The mat of plants and springs,
And fell about,
Grapes from a branch loosened.
Your shirt was torn,
A window therein opened
On the ground-floor bedroom,(2)
On a dish of wheat, of bread crumbs,
A straw cushion and a tree,
So you hid in your torn shirt
Suppress your laughter today,
As you did on the day
Your cow delivered her calf,
When you learned to feel the umbilical cord,
And the day when first you felt
The warm new-laid eggs,
Recognizing the face of your mother
In the smell of bread
And curdled milk.

You're suppressing laughter, eagerness, and fear,
Just as you had done on the day
You waited for the fairy mare
Said to appear on the tenth day of Rurharram,
Weaving from the howling wind,
And the creaky doors and
The marriage of beings, scenes
Of Judgement and the last day.
The Sun surprised you,
A reddish pie on the night table.
You were afraid lest the alley
Should wake up and catch you in the dream act,
So you were the first to get out
To meet the dew-gilded grass
And the smell of wet mud,
To look at the claw-prints of night birds on the wet soil,
Intricate and tree-like,
Branching and crossing.
Your heart beats fast
You breathe both fear and joy,
Then a breathless chase - a recognition:
This is a message for me,
These inscriptions on the earth
Spell out the secret of creation,
And include a special promise for me,

Therein I detect an alphabet,
Intricate, involved, but with no loose ends,
All dots are where they should be,
This is a dancing 'A',
And a Zed running like a bolting mare:
This is the kingdom of writing,
My crown is a word whose twigs
Continue to swim in the jungle of the Alphabet,
With a beginning but no end.
As for you, book of the inscribed earth
Where can I begin and where in the end
Of the first sentence?
A ... r... ia...
Before you have time to pick the thread
Of the first sentence
The whole world will be awake,
And Allah will have his vast land
Under the plough, with blessed industrious feet
And the hooves of animals,
While the covey of palm doves
Hide in your torn shirt.

I paint a brazier of clay
And call it a hat a camel hair,
I draw both longitudes and latitudes

On the homeland as big as a body

And call them pants of cotton,

A scarf of adolescent down,

A waistcoat of adjourned wedding;

I paint the pennies of kohl,

Oh phosphoric ecstacy

In sheds of the wind, of reeds and tree shade.

I paint the community's pot, the noontide tea,

The colour-bead ear-rings, then scribble:

This is the family tree,

The blessing of life between the sky and the river.

And look!

This is the land that exists in your steps,

And this is the carpet of thirst, ripped over,

With the rips making floral designs.

At flood time you're the sluices open,

Swelling of water,

Your arm pits smell of hay,

In your face the sun has built its huts,

The cracks on your feet

Form a sock of sheepskin,

And this land surviving in your steps

Is adorned with a secret mask.

        (A sun that opens the squares

        To congested barns,

And a summer sweeping away the cobs;
A sun for love-making and the lust of all beings;
And a movement for death and birth,
Opening in times of low water
Crevices of desire, extending
The plough of virility and water)

But the crevices in your feet
Are full of all that's in the soil:
Does the flesh of the earth
Extend in your feet, acre after acre?
Or have the names, and the rich homeland,
Overburdened with tears,
Been drawn up by your footsteps,
A chart, indicating a counterpart
In the skin of the killed calf,
While the crevices branch out
As trees and hedges about?

You now emerge from my garb,
From the vision of my wrath,
You emerge as a guard,
The sun a catapult,
And under the rough texture of your clock
A tattoo looks out – a wild deer –
The sycamore of the kingdom falls down.

You live in the time of raping poetry
So take a mandate by force
And the language of the fray,
Have a duel with powerful love,
And contest the legacy with the inheritors.

K: The last sound in like
And the first in kill;
The last in sink and the first in ken.

I: The round eyot is a dish of bread,
The last sound in dishonesty
And the first in interred.

L: A twisted scream, a woman's body
Writhing with lust, the graceful
Flight in the wind, the fullness
Of pregnancy
The challenge of delivery,
A hook stuck in the heart
Of a whirling wave.

(Are you the fish or the angler,
Or the maker of the distance
Between the furthermost prey
And the furthermost punishment?)
Each land has its fate
Bird-like hung about its neck,
Between the sun of tears,

The rough hands,

The surprise of children of inheritance:

'So read thy scroll'

This land is a testimony

Burning with flowers, grass and ears of corn,

Expanding like a feast,

Folding the bread kerchiefs

On the dialogue between the killer and the victim

The papers are folded, signed and sealed.

---

(1) Your scroll grows in between
The flesh and the fingernails
A wedding festival of shriek,
A silk of fury, drunken with the wrath of the deep,
Rising from the tremour of the wound
Under the blades of rain.
Rising: a papyrus of down,
Underneath, the cracks on the face appear,
A tattoo: a bird of fear,
While Allah doth live
In the wilderness of reeds,
Your face on the palm tree by the river,
A fruit of words, while the family table
Is divided among the Mamelukes,
Inscribed on the borders of the provinces,
He read:
Your scroll is hung about the family neck,

Live in its shadow, read your greetings
In the ringing of dusty axes,
The wedding of fear, the future
Suns of blood, and keep your meal
In the bowl of verse
Waiting for readers

(2) At the doorstep you planted a vinetree
Where the wing nestles,
Where the birds gather their chirps,
Digging, beneath the heaped bed of ashes,
A river, dreaming
    This river is weaving
A litter for riparian grass,
The nymphs emerge from the green water
And the sun, casting his bright coins,
Making you dream:
    The shawl of the bride
Is spotted with the wind, gathering
In a knot both dust and horses,
Reaching the river bank
(With water and sun separating you)
You barely waited a minute
When the prince of the invading horses and death
Appeared
He wore his armour and waded
Through the river to you,
So you dream?
The prince of the invading horses and death
Trembled, with limbs falling apart.

He dissolved in the water

Drifted in the torrent.

Do you dream? The sun is shining

In the ballads screaming

The river is hiding,

Whispering under your bed

And slumber

Is the sluice

Through which your dumb

Inheritance flows.

Cyclical Structure and Image Exploration:
Shoosha's *Language of Lovers' Blood*

In my *Anthology of the New Arabic Poetry in Egypt* (State Publishing House, Cairo, 1986) I introduced Farooq Shoosha to the English reader for the first time with a handful of poems selected from several volumes of verse. I did not write much about him or even mention that he had won the State Award for Poetry or the Arts and Sciences Medal (first class) for poetic excellence. I had been planning all along to make a selection not from a number of volumes, but from a single volume of verse so as to give the English reader a truer impression of the typical Shoosha volume. Last year, as I walked down one of the labyrinthean corridors of the Cairo Radio Building, I overheard a conversation being recorded in one of the tiny studios of the Second Programme (nearest thing to the BBC Third Programme) where a familiar voice spoke passionately. It was Professor Shukri Ayad, one of the greatest Arab critics alive, discussing a poem entitled 'Poet of the Sharp Spears': I waited in the engineers' room until the programme ended, and the members of the panel emerged, together with Shoosha holding his latest volume of verse *A Language of Lovers' Blood* . I had not seen the book before and pounced on his copy at once. Before the evening was out I had decided that it was the volume I looked for and that I might as well start doing a poem or two into English.

In late November I was in Italy for a brief visit and had one Arabic book with me - Shoosha's latest volume of verse. The weather in Rome was exceptionally nasty so that I was confined most of the time to my hotel room, struggling to understand Italian T.V. programmes or scribbling down notes for my new play which had hung fire for too long. One evening, however, I turned my attention to the Arabic book in my briefcase and, before I realized it, a poem was done into English. Others followed, as my departure was delayed by an airport staff strike, and I worked more assiduously on the book. By mid-December, nine poems had been done and, back in Cairo, I was delighted to see that little editing was needed but that, barring a last minute hitch, and, of course, subject to Shoosha's approval of my English rendering, the poems could be sent directly to the press.

There was a problem, however, as the poems were too few and the publishers (for whom I work) wanted a 'richer' collection. Negotiations were lengthy but my point of view was eventually accepted by the editorial committee. The nine poems chosen could represent the volume of Shoosha's entire work, as they represent the various 'tones' of the nineteen poems – tones which are, however, variations (to maintain the music metaphor) on the same theme. There was unity, I felt, in the poems selected and a harmony that rendered them sufficiently complementary.

Farooq Shoosha was born on 9 January 1936, in a village called *Al 'Shu' ara* (i. e. Poets), near Domyat (Damietta). The name of the village is said to date from the Crusades: it was noted for the local bards who fed the enthusiasm of the natives who fought Louis IX of France and finally captured him. The village has historical sites, a square believed to have been the 'camp' reserved for these bards, and

a vast auditorium where heroic verse was recited to large audiences. The tradition of reciting poetry is essential to Arabic in general and to the Egyptian dialect in particular. Arabic poetry relies to a great extent on the living voice, and I stress this fact because it relates directly to the poems in this collection. Shoosha tells us that in his childhood every cafe in his native village invited one or two bards to recite their colloquial verse - a cross between the typical 'epic' and the long narrative poem of the modern age. They mostly 'sung' their verses to the accompaniment of the local 'rababah' - a two-stringed version of the fiddle common in rural areas – relating the exploits of *Abu Zeid al-Hilali, Princess Dhat al-Himmah* and *Antarah.* In Ramadan, the 'performance' started a couple of hours after sunset and continued until dawn. "It was listening to these verse tales" Shoosha says, "that first introduced me to poetry as a child – giving me a feeling of its music, the way it should be delivered and its appeal to the audience".

At five the little boy joined the Quranic teaching school in the village, preparatory to joining Al-Azhar, the greatest and oldest Islamic university in the world. This was hardly peculiar to him, as many (if not most) Arab men of letters did that. Learning the Quran by heart is never an unnecessary exercise – not merely from the religious point of view but culturally and linguistically. This happened (incidentally) in my case, and I can recall how the inimitable rhetoric of our holy book impressed me and continued to balance the other influences on my written Arabic. To learn the Quran is to have access to the vast mines of Arabic, or to modify Dr. Johnson's phrase, the "wells of 'Arabic' undefiled." Having learnt the Quran by heart, Shoosha, again like many Arab writers, switched to 'general education', but the Quranic lexicon and Quranic rhythms continued to influence his literary career, even today.

At the home library of his father, a school teacher of wide ranging interests, young Farooq had his first encounter with world literature as well as classical Arabic literature. He voraciously read the translations done by Ahmed Hassan Al-Zayyat from the French classics, and the original 'classical' verses of Ahmed Shawqi, the major Arabic poet of modern times. Needless to say, the variety of literary expression and the 'romantic' spirit of these works had an indelible effect on the young boy who was now beginning to dream of a literary career. The translations, in particular, stood in sharp contrast to the verses of the village bard, and the meticulously chiselled verses of Shawqi intensified the growing boy's consciousness of the differences between the 'amorphous' prose of daily life and the well-wrought language of verse. The world of poetry was, he tells us, mysterious enough, magical enough and passionate enough to draw the aspirant to it – rather than to prose.

Towards the end of his secondary school career, he wrote a poetic play with the impressive title: "*Theatre of History* ". It dealt with the well known struggle for power between Ali Ibn Abi Taleb and Othman Ibn Affan after the death of Omer Ibn Al-Khattab, the second Caliph. Islamic history has always been a source of inspiration for aspiring Arab dramatists, not surprisingly, and such a theme as the early power struggle in the light of Islamic teachings, variously interpreted, must have caught the imagination of young Farooq. It was a theme that lent itself easily to poetic treatment and, though it must have been a juvenile experience, the play meant much to the budding poet, especially after its successful performance. He sent it to a well known publishing house and, though he hadn't really expected it to be published, it actually appeared in print in 1952, days before another power struggle began in Egypt. Shoosha was only 16.

When he obtained his Egyptian G.C.E. he knew that he had really no choice: he would read Arabic for his B.A., and the place where this could best be done was the Arabic Department at Cairo University, where Taha Hussein, 'a luminary of rare effulgence', taught. On the eve of the first term, Dar El-Oloum, the College of Arabic and Islamic studies, announced that it would accept secondary graduates (GCE) together with its usual Azharite Secondary School graduates. Farooq's father saw a chance of his old dream coming true: his eldest son would be a graduate in Azharite studies after all! Sure enough, he asked his son to apply and the boy obeyed. "I was broken-hearted," he says, "when I was told my application had been successful: the Faculty of Arts was my life-long dream, because of Taha Hussein, of course, but also because of the surpassing beauty of the girls there."

At Dar-El-Oloum, young Shoosha had his fair share of Arabic and Islamic studies: but what he had never bargained for was the quiet revolution in the teaching of Arabic classics mounted by a group of young professors who had studied abroad. Ghoneimi Hilal introduced fresh methods of teaching Comparative Literature, Mahmoud Qasim new concepts in Islamic Philosophy, and Ibrahim Salamah vigorous parallel studies in Oriental and Western literatures. There were the yet burgeoning modern linguistic studies which seemed to challenge traditional approaches to Arabic grammar – another revolution by Tammam Hassaan and Abdul Rahman Ayyoub. A traditionalist by training, Ibrahim Anis showed no opposition to that revolutionary trend, and his studies in Phonetics, Arabic Dialects and Metrics bridged the gap between classical and modern approaches to language and literature. There was a windfall too for GCE boys: a course in English literature by professor James Manning, of Ain Shams

University. The texts ranged from Shavian drama to novels by the Brontes and Austen. Shakespeare was, of course, essential.

In the 1950s, now a 'naturalized' Cairene, young Farooq began an independent course of self-education. He was first attracted to the poets of the 'romantic school' – Ibrahim Nagui, Ali Mahmoud Taha, and Mahmoud Hassan Ismail, who had revolutionized Arabic poetry in the 1930s, 'in content and spirit, though not in form'. They had been fascinated by the English romantic poets and, in their attempts to imitate them (or the Arabic versions of their verse) taught the Arabic reader not to expect panegyrics, satires, but poems on individual human emotions whether the subject was 'nature' or 'society'. Their diction was new, their 'tone' new, but the outer form of their verse was not. Only the more revolutionary of the "Apollo School' (that was what they called themselves) could experiment with the tradition in this regard. Their audience was divided, naturally, in the beginning, but they succeeded eventually in converting substantial portions of their reluctant readers so that by the 1940s, few people could expect the old, pre-Islamic or early Islamic, tunes in the poetry of the twentieth century. The romantic spirit of these poets was invigorated by the 'national question' – the fight for independence, and the new ideas on democratizing the system of government. And just as the English romantics were social rebels, ridiculing the King and satirizing the iniquities of government, the Arabic romanticists espoused the national cause which soon acquired Pan-Arab dimensions, with the end of the Second World War, particularly when Israel was established in 1947. The poems of Ali Mahmoud Taha on the question of Palestine published in *Al-Ahram* and set to music by Abdul-Wahab, no less, fanned the nationalistic flames higher: no-one can claim to hear them, even today, without being moved. And

Ismail's verse, on 'nature' and national issues alike, continued to be popular until well after the 1952 Revolution.

In the later 1940s, however, some of the experiments in free verse began to mature. It became clear to many poets, both in Iraq and Egypt, that the traditional form of the poem, that is, the rhymed lines of equal length, was not serving their purposes well. Rhyme was initially disposed of, as a violent reaction to the restrictive tradition, then accepted in various rhyme schemes dictated by the 'kind' of poem written. The length of the lines was varied as the fixed number of feet in each line constituted an artificial hindrance to the easy flow of the ideas. The result was the New Verse, using the single foot as a unit, with the lines given an inner life of their own with or without rhyme. The major figures whose powerful specimens helped to establish the new verse were Badr Shakir El-Sayyab, Abdul-Wahhab El-Bayyati (Iraq,) and Salah Abdul-Saboor and Ahmed Abdul-Mu'ti Hijazi (Egypt). Reading their verses, Farooq realized that he had found his immediate models, and soon managed to write a poem in this new form -'Lost in the Crowd'- in 1955.

In the mid-1950s, the growing boy's consciousness opened up to the political ideas that proliferated at the time - Pan-Arabism or "Arab nationalism", the common destiny of the Arabs and need for them to re-unite if they were to revive their past glory, socialist thought, class conflict, and various ideologies. Political and economic 'culture' was in the air: it provided an essential background to the education of Shoosha's generation regardless of the differences in personal temperament, or in literary and 'creative' interests. And against that background, he tells us, many of the poems included in the two volumes *To A Departing Lady* and *Burnt-out Eyes* were written.

To A Departing Lady , his first volume of verse, did not appear until 1966, ten years after he got his B.A. He tells us that behind it was a unique experience in the Arabian Gulf, when he worked for some time as an announcer at Kuwait Radio. Judging by my own experience elsewhere in the Arabian Peninsula, the time he spent there must have been trying indeed: apart from referring to it as an 'experience in alienation' Shoosha is reluctant to spell out what had happened. He tells us however, that some of the poems in that first volume were a 'reflection of that experience', and that he came to recognize there some of the problems of Arab life, and the 'cultural and existential crisis of Arab man'.

There is another experience, however, worthy of recording. On graduation in 1956, Shoosha, like many other graduates in those days, automatically joined the Faculty of Education, Ain Shams University, to qualify as a teacher. Having distinguished himself in the Education courses he had studied, he won a scholarship to study 'Comparative Education' abroad. Meanwhile, he taught Arabic at a 'model' secondary school for a whole year. I cannot minimize the importance of this experience, though little is known about it. However, as the formalities of travel were long and weary, he applied for and got a job as announcer and 'literary programmes' producer at Cairo Radio in 1958. Over the last thirty years, he has led a successful career, culminating in his appointment as Deputy Director-General of Cairo Radio.

The main features of Shoosha's verse may be summed up as follows: powerful rhythm, fresh and challenging imagery, cyclic thematic structure, and experimentation with form. The first feature, rhythm, is impossible to preserve in translation: it comes from his perfect command of classical Arabic and expert knowledge of Arabic

phonetic structures. This is easily accounted for in terms of the oral tradition of Arabic verse which has been kept alive over the centuries. Working for the radio must have helped him a great deal to master the various techniques of delivering Arabic verse, and his daily five-minute radio programme 'Our Beautiful Language' has proved this mastery beyond a shadow of doubt. Shoosha's television programmes are no less important, in so far as they help him to use different levels of Arabic, and invite him to maintain a conversation in classical (and beautiful) Arabic for the length of the programme with different speakers. The rhythm of his Arabic words is often compelling and, in his verse, it has a charm all its own. But while this is impossible to preserve in translation, his imagery could be, to a certain extent, of course, rendered. Let me, therefore, explain what I mean by 'challenging' imagery.

The opening poem, 'Features', presented me with many difficlties in translation, mainly because of the 'precise' wording designed to blur the contours of the imagery. How precision could be thus used is Shoosha's achievement, and the poem is truly a *tour de force*. The translation has, therefore, tended to be a little too literal, but then it could not be helped. To begin with, I was faced with a pronoun in Arabic which could translate as 'he' or 'it' in English and the only 'solution' I could find was to establish a link, natural enough, between the three parts of the poem so that the speaker is identified as the mysterious 'he'. But the mystery is hardly unravelled, for what 'descends' now 'seeps' in the sand and vanishes inscrutably. Is the knight errant of yore landing in our world from realms unknown, vanished or vanishing? If it is the speaker of the third part, what is the first person pronoun doing in the second? My point is that what we

have here is an 'image of atmosphere', carefully built up to contrast the world of 'shades' (the abode of the spirits or the Greek underworld, now referred to in terms of the 'desert scene' common in the classical Arabic tradition) to that of the modern world. But to contrast them is also to identify the one with the other: for it is in the 'shades' that the Spirit has a full life, having been freed from the 'prison house' of the body (to quote Wordsworth), and, in so far as there is a freedom of spirit, real or imaginary, the image of the shades cannot be far from our minds. The eerie atmosphere in the first part is, therefore, intended to conjure up this image in terms of a common desert scene, as I have suggested, from the tradition, and the modulation in the last part clinches the point by concluding the image conjured up from the past in the image of the city-gate and the lady in the litter on camel-back - with the reintroduction of the spirit from the shades. Strangely, the link is provided from a tradition that is more universal than specifically Greek or Arabic: it is a Promethean image in reverse, where the tortured man waits not for the night (when the vulture or eagle will stop devouring his liver) but for daybreak that never comes. The sense of eternal life here (in torment or otherwise) links the Shades to the Promethean world, so that when the poet focuses in the end on the 'real' scene, that is, the more intelligible terms of the third part, a single phrase will be sufficient to indicate the continuity of the atmosphere, namely 'the kingdoms of damnation dungeons'.

As in the case of every great poem, the meaning is determined by the reader's experience and 'poetic' training. An Arab reader may not be willing to admit my interpretation easily, considering the links I have established with, say, Greek literature. The 'shades' of the fourth

line may simply mean 'shade' after all, for both the singular and plural forms of the word in Arabic amount to the same thing. But then, how can he interpret the rest of the imagery? To recognize this difficulty or, at least, that the imagery can be 'controversial', is to recognize what I have referred to as the 'challenging' quality of the imagery.

Now, for the 'cyclic thematic structure'. Shoosha has developed a form (all his own) which, over the years, has come to be characterized by cyclic structure, that is, you end the poem where you started, having gone through many 'twists and turns' in the main theme. Sometimes, a twist takes the form of an epicycle only, before another one starts: but the epicycles often unite in the end to form a full cycle. An obvious example is 'Tablet Lines' where the theme of rebirth is developed in one direction - in the first section, 'Quartets',- then in the opposite, in the second, then, coming full circle to the starting point, the theme is given the flesh and blood of intelligible experience.

As in 'Features', 'Tablet Lines' begins with a pronoun that hangs in the air. The head in the first quartet (though in translation it came out a sestet) could belong to any man or any creature, and the ambiguity in the expression 'vanishing in every direction' is deliberate. As the Arabic word for 'vanishing' is the same one used to indicate sunset (i.e. sinking behind the horizon) there can be only one direction in which his head could 'vanish' or 'set', hence the ambiguity. Could the head belong to the 'sun'? This is not an unlikely 'meaning' in so far as the 'hectic blood... flowing... on the horizon' can be easily seen as the purple colour of sunset, and herein lies the paradox of the first part. Could the long night that follows 'sunset' (or death) be regarded as a 'new life born'? This is, no doubt, the apparent meaning of the lines, but then the paradox is not absolute as the 'new

life born' could be a promise and it could hang on the horizon in the same way as hope can survive vicissitudes of human life.

This initial paradox leads to a more concrete image – a bird flying in the night in search of 'the face of day'. This development is, to say the least of it, unexpected. The bird cannot be identified as 'the new life born', nor can it be, unless a 'forced' reading is made, the creature whose head 'vanishes in every direction'. It is an independent 'protagonist' and must be accepted as such.

The common approach to quartets of this kind is to handle each separately, even if a line of continuity, or a link of some sort, can be traced. In fact, apart from the initial quartet, the image of the bird is maintained and developed to a definite climax: and the final impression could, had it not been for the word 'reborn' in line 2 of quartet V, suggest a conclusion! The crucial 'reborn', in fact, links the last four quartets with the first one, establishing the link that had been but obliquely implied between the yearning for a 'new life born' and the final version of the same theme 'eternity in his being reborn'. In other words, rather than turn an abstraction into a concretion, Shoosha raises the concrete bird to the level of the early abstraction, so that the ending is at once an image of departure (the final 'flight' and the early 'vanishing') and an abstract hope of 'return'.

Now this theme is handled in totally different terms in section 'B'. The abstract departure and return now assume the flesh and blood of human experience, a human relationship wherein separation and meeting are dealt with as a cycle of light and dark, or day and night, so that the 'blank periods' are imaginatively equated with the 'night', and the dark becomes an image of the 'vacancy' suggested by the journey of the bird in search of 'the face of day'.

This 'cycle' is not yet complete. As the other part of the image is still undeveloped, what we have here is closer to an epicycle than to a full cycle. By the other 'part' I simply mean the metaphor of journey - which is now handled and presented, with consummate skill, as an impossible quest. The desert journey becomes a trap, almost like life, and the hopes raised on the 'bird's' journey are drained. The concluding words complete the second epicycle - 'in search of a non-existent shore'.

Not until the final part, in fact, does the thematic cycle, as built up by the variations of the first three parts, appear complete. The key words used in each of the epicycles come together now - the 'face', the 'shadows', the 'travel', the 'dark', and the 'horizon' - so that the emerging image inevitably combines the paradoxes inherent in each theme. The 'impossible promise' now comes into its own, proving that, even though 'impossible', it must, as a dream, initiate a movement - and every movement is, by definition, positive. The 'distant starlet' crawling on the horizon is the obvious symbol of a born or a reborn hope, and the single line 'forming on the tablet' is an undeniable beginning. It is only in the final part, in other words, that the initial paradox of 'death declaring a new life born' is realized.

The last feature of Shoosha's verse, what I have called 'experimentation with form', requires less comment than the others. As this poem, 'Tablet Lines', shows, Shoosha believes that 'form' has a meaning and that it is dictated by the kind of material he handles.

The thematic unity of this volume of verse is no doubt matched by 'formal' unity, but then within this unity there is adequate diversity. Length, for instance, varies considerably according to the 'emotional complex', to use an ultra-modern term, which each poem

represents. Though Shoosha's favourite form is the 'long poem', a modernist genre popularized by poets of the 'Movement' in England (e.g. John Wain), the internal structure indicates a tendency to make external form a perfect reflection of it. 'Features' is short enough to make the parts appear temporally unified, while .'Tablet Lines' is divided into parts of unequal length and different characteristics so as to ensure the cyclic movement within. Never before in Arabic did a poet attempt such a mixture of 'quartets' with the modern verse form of Arabic poetry. Nor had any poet previously attempted such a cyclic movement as the great elegy 'Poet of the Sharp Spears' presents. That the formal structure could so faithfully correspond to the inner movement of image and idea is a feat of poetic performance which only genuine talent can produce. The 117 lines are divided into four sections of approximately equal length (25-30-37-25) but with a distinct movement within each to make it capable of standing by itself as part of a poetic 'sequence'. The internal movement is governed by what has been described in Romantic poetry as 'incremental repetition', primarily associated with Wordsworth's style. Consider the structure of the first part of this elegy on the untimely death of Amal Donqul, a great poet whose name came to be associated with the cult of political opposition in Egypt in the 1970s; or indeed any other part of the same poem. There is, throughout, a boldness in the use of Arabic that belongs almost entirely to Shoosha; and the translation will, I hope, adequately reflect this.

Egyptian Poetry Since the 1970s: A Mininature Anthology

by

M.S. Farid

Following are 37 (mostly very short) poems, or extracts from longer poems, by twenty different Egyptian poets, culled from a number of books of verse and periodicals. It may not be inappropriate to say a few words about the poets by way of introduction.

The first poet to appear here, Ahmed Abdul Mutti Hijazi, is Egypt's most important living poet. Together with the late Salah Abdul Saboor, he led the 'new poetry' movement in the mid-fifties. Hijazi was born in a small village in Lower Egypt in 1935. He read Arabic at a Teacher's Training college in Cairo and spent a number of years in France. His early socialism was enriched by exposure to modernist tendencies in European, especially French, literature. Volumes of poetry include *A Heartless City; It Remains Only to Confess; Uras; An Elegy for the Beautiful Years; Creatures of the Kingdom of Night* and *Cement Trees*. There is a *Collected Poems* and a selection with an introduction by Abed Khazindar. *Muhammad and These* is a study of the figure of Prophet Muhammad in modern Arabic literature. Books of criticism are: *The Poem of Rejection; Poetry is my Companion; Shawqi's Grandchildren* and *Poetic Questions*.

Our next poet, Farooq Shoosha, was born in Damietta in 1936. He graduated from the Dar el-Uloum College, University of Cairo, in 1956, and obtained a Teacher's Training Diploma from Ain Shams University in 1957. Having taught Arabic for a short spell at a

prepartory school, he joined the Egyptian Broadcasting Station of which he is currently Chairman. A well-known media man, he likes to think of hismelf (rightly, I think) as basically a poet. To the present writer he is (together with M. Abou Sinnah, Afifi Mattar. Amal Donqol and Salah Jaheen), a major figure in the second wave of the 'New Poetry' movement in Egypt. Volumes of Poetry include: *To a Departing Love* (1966), *Burnt Eyes* (1972), A *Pearl in the Heart* (1973), *Waiting for what Never Comes* (1979), *A Closed Circle* (1983), *The Complete Poetical Works* (1985). *The Language of Lovers' Blood* (1985, done into English by M.M. Enani, 1990), *Thus Speaks Arab Blood* (1988), *Come on, I'm Ready* (1992), and, most recently, *Water Lady* (1994). Prose works are: *Words on the Road, Our Beautiful Language* (1973), *Our Beautiful Lamguage and the Problems of Modern Times* (1979), *Poetry as a Therapy* (1982), *A Cultural Confrontation* (1989) and *Agonies of a Beautiful Lifetime* (1992), an autobiooraphy). He edited two anthologies: *The Most Beautiful Twenty Love Poems in Arabic* (1973) and *The Most Beautiful Twenty Poems of Divine Love* (1983).

Next Comes Nassar Abdullah, poet, critic and translator. A Professor of Philosophy at the Faculty of Arts, Souhag, Upper Egypt, he was born on 24th December 1945 at Badari, Assyout Goverorate. He graduated from the Faculty of Economics and Political Science in 1966. A B. A. M.A. and Ph. D. in Phiosophy from the Faculty of Arts, University of Cairo, he is the author of a book on Bertrand Russell and the translator of some philosophical works from English. Before joining the army he worked as editor at the State Informatoin Service, then as economic researcher at the Central Bank of Egypt. Some of his early work was inspired by his experiences as a soldier in wars with Israel in 1969, 1970 and 1973. Volumes of verse include:

My Heart, a Lost Child (1979), *Sorrows of the Early Ages* (1981) (awarded a state prize), *I Asked His Handsome Face* (1984) and *I Still Say* (1990). A (to my way of thinking. not very successful) historical drama, *Drought*, came out in the 1987. He also translated Russell's *Nightmares of Eminent Men* into Arabic.

Another poet of the sixties is Ahmed Suwailam (born in 1942), a graduate of the Faculty of Commerce in 1966. Volumes of Poetry iclude: *The Road and the Perplexed Heart* (1967), *Emigration from the four Corners of the Earth* (in collaboration with three other poets, 1970), In *Search of the Unknown Circle* (1973), *Night and The Memory of Sheets* (1977). *Going out to the River* (1980), *Travel and Decorations* (1985), *The Great Thirst* (1986), *Longing in the Cities of Love* (1987), *Readings in the Book of Night* (!989). A collected *Poetical Works* 1967-1987, with an introduction by Shauqi Dayf, came out in 1992. This was followed by *Splinters* (1993), his most recent volume of poetry to date. Works of criticism are: *Our Classical Poetry from a Modern Perspective* (1981), *Women in the Poetry of al-bayyati* (1984), *Our Childern, as seen by Poets* (1985), *Mohamed al-Harawi: A poet for Childern* (1986), *Cultural Education of Arab Children* (1991), and *Muslims Who Overcame their Handicaps* (1991). Suwailam works for a major publishing house and is a winner of a number of literay awards. Writings for children include: *Tales from the Arabian Nights* (1980), *Ten Verse Plays* (1987), *Wisdom of our Forefathers* (1989) and *Donkey's Prize and other Stories* (1992). He also wrote three verse plays: *Akhenaton* (1982), *Shahrayar* (1983) and *Antara* (forthcoming).

Farooq Guwaida (born 1945) is literary editor of *al-Ahram* newpaper. Volumes of poetry include: *Leaves from the Garden of October* (1974), *Stay, Love!* (1975), *Love will Always Remain* (1977),

Longings Will Be Back (1978), *In Your Eyes is My Address* (1979), *Always Will You Dwell in My Heart* (1981), *Because I love You, Something Will Remain Between the Two of Us, My Heart would Let Me Forget, My Life is Not for Sale, Lessons from the time of Oppression. Egyptian Funds and How They were Squandered* (1967) is economic history. *Land of Magic and Phantasy* (1981) is an account of a journey to India. He has three verse plays to his credit: *A Vizier in Love* (1981) (English translation as *The Fall of Cordova* by M.M. Enani). *Blood on the Curtains of the Kaaba* (Eglish translation by Souad Naguib, forthcoming) and, most recently, *The Khedive.* These plays were a great success on stage, both in Egypt and in a number of Arab countries. There is also a *Complete Works.*

Mohamed Abu Douma, remarkable for his magnificent rhetoric, was born in Upper Egypt in 1941. A graduate of the University of Cairo in 1963 (where he read Persian and Turkish) he later got a Ph..D. from Hungary. He works for GEBO (The State Publishing House) and is the author of four books of verse: *Travels in the Rivers of Thirst* (1979), *Standing on the Knife's Edge* (1983), *I Shun Your Company so that I May travel Through You* (1988) and *Agonies of the Fountainheads of Love* (1990).

Wasif Sadiq, a pharmacist, has a number of books of verse to his credit. 'Deleted Psalm' was Published in a London monthy *al-Naqid* (The Critic) for May 1990.

A traditionlist by temperament, Ismail Uqab, a poet from the coastal town of Marsa Matrouh, is the author of *Steps of Blindfolded* Hope (1979), *Poems Inspired by Her Eyes* (1983) and *She and the Sea* (1989). Forthcoming are four plays: *All is Plastic*; *The File*; *Tale of a Darling* and *Hedewa's Tricks.*

Ali Qandil was a promising young poet whose untimely death in 1975 caused much grief. Two posthumous volumes are *The Rising Beings of Ali Qandil* and the *Complete Poetical Works 1970-1975* (1993).

A friend of Qandil's who did much to perpetuate his memory is Hilmi Salem (born in 1951). He is the author of *My Beloved is Steeped in the Blood of the Earth* (1974), *Alexandrian is Pain* (1981), *The Mediterranean* (1984). *A Biography of Beirut* (1986), *My Corridors and Heavy Summer* (1990). *Al-Baeyya wal Haeii* (1990, roughly, poems ending, or supposed to end, with the rhyme sounds: ب،ح), and *Jurisprudence of Pleasure* (1993). Prose works are *Culture under Siege* (1984) and *Chord and Performers*: *Readings in Modern Arabic Poetry* (1992).

Refat Salam is a poet and translator. Something of a futurist himself, he has rendered Mayakovsky's *A Cloud in Trousers* and a number of poems by other poets (Pushkin. Lermontov, Ristos) into Arabic. Books of verse include: *Beautiful Rose of Chaos* (1987), *Illuminations* (1992), *She is Beckoning to Me* (1993), *Thus I Spoke to the Precipice* (1993). Two critical studies are *Arab Verse Drama* (1986) and *In Search of the Legacy of the Arabs* (1989).

Walid Munir (born 1957) is the author of a Rimbeauesque first volume *The Pastoralist Who Took the Plain by Surprise Somewhere Between the Erratic Blood and the Impossible Dark* (1984). Later and (to the present writer) less interesting works are: *The Nile Has Grown Green in the Eyes* (1985), *Poems for the Faraway, Faraway* (1988). and *Some Time for a Little Surprise* (1993). A short verse play on the Persian poet and astronomer Omar Al-Khayyam, *House of Stars*

appeared in the literary magazine *Ibdaa* (Creativity) for July 1984. A promising scholar and author of books on Salah Abdul-Saboor and Mikhail Naimy, Munir has recently received a Ph.D. with Honours from the Academy of Arts. He is on the editorial board of the cultural quarterly *Fusul* (the word could mean both 'Chapters' and 'Seasons').

Gamal Al-Qassas (born in 1950) is a founder member of the *Idaa* (Illumination) Group of poets and the author, so far, of two volumes of poetry: *The Feud of the Rose* (1983) and *A Marble Sun* (1990).

Farid Abu Sida was born in Al-Mahala Al-Kubra in Lower Egypt. A professional designer and journalist, he works, like Ahmed Suwailam, for a publishing house. Books of verse include: *Travel to the Source of the Rivers* (1985). *A Rose for Al-Tawaseen* (Al Tawaseen being a mystical treatise by Al-Hallaj) (1988). *The Der Leaps into Fire* (1989) and *Rose of the Blaze of Noon* (1993). Forthcoming are five short plays, a genre for which he seems to be particularly well equipped.

An important poet of the seventies is Hassan Tilib (born 1944). A Ph.D. in aesthetics. he is editorial secretary of *Ibdaa* (Creativity). Tilib has six books of verse to his credit: *Tattoo on a Girl's Breasts* (1972), *Biography of the Violet* (1986). *Eternity of Fire in Perpetuity of Light* (1988), *Time of Beryl* (1989), *Verse of Jeem* (the letter ج in Arabic. 1992) and *There is but One Nile* (1993). Hitherto a specialist in singing the praises of the violet (both the colour and the flower, but mainly the latter), Tilib is obviously capable of exploring larger areas and, if one may say so, of handling weightier themes. It is sometimes difficult to take his seemingly interminable play on letters, and his typographical devices. very seriously.

Baha Jaheen, son to the well-known poet and cartoonist, is a B.A. in English from Cairo University. After a brief spell of teaching there, he opted for journalism. He is currently on the staff of *Al-Ahram*, the most prestigious daily newspaper in the Arab world . 'Black Banner' comes from his first book of verse *Dancing in the Traffic Jam* (1986), poems in both classical and colloquial Arabic, with an introduction by professor M.M. Enani of Cairo University. This was followed by a second volume *The Tenanted Shirt* (1990).

Next there is Ahmed Al-Shahwi, possibly the most important poet of the eighties. Born in the coastal town of Damietta in 1960, he graduated with a B.A. from the Department of Journalism, Faculty of Arts of Souhag in 1983. A journalist on *Al-Ahram*, he is editorial secretary of *Nisf Al-Dunya*, a woman's fashionable magazine. Books of verse are: *Southern Flowers* (1982), *Two Prostrations before Love* (1987). *Discourses, Book One* (1991). *Discourses, Book Two* (1992). *The Book of Love* (1992) is a melange of poetry, narration and autobiogaphy. A selection of his poems is currently being translated into English in the U.S.A. to be published, with a critical introduction, by M.S. Farid.

Ezzat Al-Tayri is a poet from upper Egypt with *a first* books of verse to his credit. Occasionally superficial, he manages, nevertheless, to make some interesting statements in his, often, extremely short poems.

Another master of the short poem is Ibrahim Dawud, one of the most talented poets of the rising generation. He is author of two slim volumes: *Details* (1989). and *A Slight Drizzle Out of Doors* (1993), from which 'Daily' and 'Out of Dors' are drawn.

The last poet to appear here is Mohamed Metwalli. Born in 1970, he is the youngest of these poets. A B.A. in English from the Faculty of Arts, Cairo University, his first and - as yet - only volume of verses *Once Upon a Time* won the Yusuf Al-Khal Prize for Poetry in 1992. 'Waiting for an Important Call' and 'Attention' are both prose poems, a dificult genre in which he particulatrly excels.

Two poets whom I would have liked to include but could not do se (partly, but not entirely, for reasons of space) are Mohamed Adam and Amjad Rayan. Mohamed Adam (author of *Labyrinth of the Body, Book of Time and Phrase* and *I am the Splendour of the Body and the Perfections of the Circle)* I expect will soon be recognised as the major poet I take him to be. He is at his best in the long poem (a genre he has made his own) running to several pages on end. Amjad Rayan, born in 1952 in Upper Egypt, is the author of *Songs for the Love of the Soil* (1972), *The Green* (1978), *I Plough the Blaze of Palm Trees* (a long poem, 1983), *An Edge for the Sun* (1989), *No Limit to Morning* (1990), *Strike, Handsome Child!* (poems in celebration of the palestinian uprising *Intifada.* (1990), *I Sign in White Feathers* (1991), *Yesterday, Being* (1991), A *Mirror for Gods* (1991). He also brought out a number of critical studies. Rayan is steeped both in Western modernism (mainly through translations) and in Egyptian folklore. It is precisely for this very reason that he presents the traslator with special difficulties, though not, perhaps, more so than some of the poets I have chosen to include.

A third poet, one who writes in colloquial Arabic, and who seems to me to be worthy of mention in any account, however brief, of the contemporary literary scene, is Majid Youssuf. A journalist and the author of a little treatise on Chekhov, his *Lady of Sorrow and Beauty*

(1980), *Three Mirrors on a Cinder* (1990), *Egyptian Dovetailings* (1991) and *A Female in Frame* (1994), establish him as one of the best writers of verse in colloquial Arabic since the death of Fouad Hadad and Salah Jaheen.

The above by no means exhausts all the important poets writing in Egypt today. I am by no means unaware of the merits of other poets whom I have not so far mentioned: Abdul Moneim Awad, Abdel Samii Zayn Al-Deen, Omar Bateesha, Ahmed Luttfi, Wafaa Wagdi, Yusri Khamis, Mohamed Sulayman, Abdul Moneim Ramadan, Salah Al-Lakani, Mohamed Khalaf, Mahmoud Nessim, Mohamed Badawi (a specialist, like Walid Munir, in Salah Abdul Saboor), Ahmed Zarzour, Ahmed Taymour, Mohamed Al-Shahwi, Ahmed Taha, Abdul Maqsood Abdul Karim, Mohamed Eid Ibrahim, Azza Badr, Nadir Nashed, Munir Fawzi, to name but a few. But a Miniature Anthology, such as the present one, cannot do justice to everybody. Let what follows be just a foretaste of what Egyptian poets have been doing over the past quarter of a century and an incentive to further exploration and a more substantial representation.

Ahmed Abdel Mutti Hijazi.

Unemployment

I and the Arab Revolution
Are looking for a job in the Paris streets
Looking for a room
Loafing in the April sun
A time has gone
Another comes!
I said unto the Arab Revolution:

You must be back.

As for me

I am doomed

Under this warm drizzle.

April 1974.

From Five Short Poems

Love Poem

Could it be that the more you grow in years, the younger you become?

When shall we meet then?

A vast night

In which I have none but your intimate absence for mother and father!

Farooq Shoosha

Prologue to 'Thus Speaks Arab Blood'

Cities for departure

Who will hold the earth fast?

Who dare plant his feet firm

And stand in the face of the tide

Swearing:

This is the end of my death

This is the commencement of my voice

This is my road to the impossible!

Lineage

Reveal your lineage, it was said
To which we replied: we have our roots in water
Sun
Wind
Volcanoes
What but fire is the origin of coals
Who but thieves of land possess the land
To whom do mice belong, if not to the treasury safes
To whom do lambs belong, if not to wolves
To whom do charlatans belong, if not to the sultan?

* * *

Confess, we were told
To which we replied: we are guilty as far as the clan is concerned
We did not expatiate
Made no clever overtures
Could not distinguish between the elite and the riff-raff
Between pure princes and hirelings
Between bird songs
And the blowing of trumpets
We had our cards all shuffled
Went down to the markets
Grasped the meanings of no questions
Our only gain being foes and disasters
In a time afflicted with oblivion!
Go away, it was said
To which we replied: we shall not budge from this place
Until the lie is shown for what it is

Until dawn breaks
Until poetry is back to its rightful place
And the scales are just!

Nassar Abdallah

Song for Al Muthalath Cemetery

Your skulls besiege me
And obstruct the way stretching from my wailing wall in Kabreet
To my wailing wall on the soil of Huckstep
Your skulls crawl and crawl
The bone of the back, the shoulders and the legs
Crawl and crawl
As if the bone were a soldier
Carrying his rucksack on his back
With gun in hand and dusty helmet on head
As if the bone were a celestial epic
Haunting and denouncing me
Reminding me
That a few months ago this skeleton
Was walking by my side
Fighting the griefs with me
Sharing sleep on the ground, sharing
The loaf of bread and memory
Sharing the dust of the road stretching from my wailing wall in Kabreet
To my wailing wall on the soil of Huckstep

Reminding me
That the bones of this head had eyes
And a face dreaming of the morrow
In the dark of the dreary ditch it recited
To me verses that moved my heart
We used to divide each line of verse into two distichs
And the two halves would not be one
Unless our griefs were one
Our lonely anguish was divided between us two
And now here I am, alone, eventually
Alone with grief and poetry
Gazing at your skulls
That scream in my face
As if your bones,O comrades, were a living voice
A living face
Gazing at me،
Reminding me and denouncing me
I swear I have not forgotten, but the true bones
Say unto me: lies. False is this voice.
Nothing but death can bring the quick and the dead together.
Your skulls gaze at me, see me,
And denounce me
Your skulls besiege me,
Fight with me
And kill me.

(Al- Muthalath Cemetery is where the dead of the Egyptian Third Army are buried.
A fellow soldier of the poet's was killed in Kabreet in the attrition war. Another fellow was killed in Huckstep).

A Very Short Communique to Sons of the Arab Nation

(Written on the occasion of the first Israeli invasion of the South of Lebanon, the so-called Littany Operation)

The letter is on the lips
This is the time for 'No' and 'Never'
You, stained with silence.
Make your ablutions in abominable usurpation
Wash in blood.

Ahmed Suwailam

Death

I am surprised by a nocturnal ghost
Heavier than my cares.. I suppose it is death.
Oh! I do not rush my guest
For I am still spinning my yarn
And having it hung on the wall of silence.
Hence my poetry!

In Good Graces

I am scattered by my love for you
In the world of the impossible
How could I gain your favour
When all the roads are blocked
And my tracks are lost
Except for one or two
When shall I boast to the world
That I am in your good graces, if only for a second?

Farooq Guwaida

Dedication to 'My Life is Not for Sale'

Love fills us, we drown not knowing
Whether it is love or death we are carrying
For some kinds of love are death
And some kinds of death are love.

Dedication to 'Something will Remain between the Two of Us"

Every year it was my wont to carry a flower of longing eager for you
Every year it was my wont to cull a few of my days and place their fragrance between your hands
Every year dreams used to be an orchard decorating my eyeballs and yours
But winter flowers are niggardly, as miserly unto my heart as they are unto yours.
Sorry, love. I come flowerless
To offer you instead a sample of my sorrows.

Mohamed Abu Douma

Prologue to 'Travels in the Rivers of Thirst'

Come nearer and pour yourself in my thirsty heart
Mix yourself with my blood
Hide from their eyes in mine
Let me look for myself in your eyes
O whispers of sweet time

Come nearer
So that I may learn the secret of the difficult letter
So that I may forget my barren days
For I have just started:
Mix yourself with my blood so that I may learn who you are.

Dilemma

Which of the two, O Lord?
Which of them, O heart?
Laila
Or Valeria
Valeria
Or Laila?
Which of the two?
Vision is no substitute for an eye's pupil.
Both then!
But how come when, my Lord, there is no common language between one woman and another?
What a dilemma!

Wasfi Sadiq

Deleted Psalm

Glad you are with your tears,
Genuflection
And prayers.
Never will God respond to you
To survivors and deserters from the war of life.
Do you think that He will fight on behalf of you?

Never
With those hands of yours folded behind your backs
Or raised to heaven, in the dark.
Your swords have dropped
Just like your dreams.
The tree to be watered by your blood
Has dried up.
Just as your parsimonious blood in the arteries has done.
What did you grant it
But humiliation and tears?
Glad you are with your tears,
Genuflection
And prayers.
Alas!
You poor, without blessing
You meek.
The salt of humiliation on this earth
In the lust of time
Glad you are
To sit eternally on the thrones of humiliation, you poor.
Your heaven is a disgrace
Your immortality is that of sceptres
You will survive
As God's sorrow, in His heavens, will survive.
Gald you are with your tears,
Genuflections
And prayers.
Glad you are, slaves,

Because you will inherit the shackles on this earth
Glad you all: the sad,
The bereaved,
The thirsty,
The hungry,
Glad you are, scum of the earth,
therefore rejoice
Be satisfied
Jubilate
For tomorrow
You will earn your wages in heaven.
Tomorrow
You will inherit the kingdom of hell's paradise.

Ismail Uqab

The Ancient Knight

The green gress asks me
The cups of coffee ask me
As do the lemonade glasses
The waiter asks me
His silent eyes ask me
Aware of the extent of my loss:
Where is your beautiful girl?
My glances seek refuge behind people's feet
I drink cups of sorrow alone
Then get up to leave.

Ali Qandil

Illuminations

Ask not about Ali
He has been rolled by evening steeds
To the end of wheat and beans
When the field of the sky collapsed
Concealing the young who were preparing supper
Exactly:
Playing the roles of lovers and prophets.

* * *

Closed are the home's balconies
Absent is the lamp
No family
No hearth
No confusion drawing you this way and that
Drawers of secrets have departed
With them
Except for a silence gone to sleep
Disturbed only
By flowing drops of water.

Hilmi Salem

She is Ready for a Step

Ask her for a dance
Witness her hands on the calculator
Sleep, waiting for her, in the interval separating the end of the

sea from the beginning of the ambush,

Now she is ready for a step

Has appeared at the entry to the eastern block of flats

To say farewell.

Ask her for a dance

Leave the island sinking tonight

In the bottles of the guards' party,

The poetic image won't come.

Her fingers still

On the doorbell.

From 'A Deer under a Tyrant'

(v) Memory

Forget Hamlet, forget Amr

Which of us has not stabbed his own palm?

Worlds are of cement, houses a doll

Male smell is farther than the nose

Leave me the peace of basalt just as one peripateic has willed.

Neither Safaqis* nor Mashtool* Is my Kith and Kin!

Refat Salam

It is Time

A scream

* Safaqis: a Tunisian town. Mashtool: a town in Lower Egypt.

Landing, in the morning, on my window.
I drive it away:
It lands on my hair
I drive it away
It lands on my heart
I say:
Now it is time for my bitter appointment.

Morning

The sea knocks on my window in the sudden morning.
I was not, yet, a dead man.
I was drinking what was left
Taking note of things
Endowing them with their final features
When the sea started knocking on my window
And left me:
A dead man.

Walid Munir

Sindbad and the Dream

His steed – the wind carrying him to another kingdom
His carpet – the wind carrying him to another kingdom
His lantern – the wind carrying him to another kingdom
While we are blind, are blind,
Captives here in the kingdom of earth.
Night has blindfolded us
And the raven has deafened us.

A Death

The three detectives opened the drawers of his days.
They made a thorough investigation.

Found a photo,
A medicine,
A copybook,
A cigarette
And a few candles.
They laughed inwardly
Closed all his drawers
And went away.
He leaned on his chair
Slept, like a song, forever.
It was a Sunday,
On his death he came upon a narcissus in Jesus' book.

Gamal Al-Qassas

From Scenes (1979)

II

Fruit of the dim trees creep
The mob of clouds washes the shroud of the rain
The street lamps are intoxicated with chill
A girl selling cigarettes
Shivering in the catarrh of the light
A man urinating on a garden fence
Goes away, raving
'This world is a wolf,
History a herd'.

Farid Abu Sida

Assassination

Carnation of the sun is dangling, the silent evening is growing thicker

These open carnations of blood
In a hawk's claw
At the moment of death
A sparrow was trembling
The sun was the last thing seen
Death was holding the two tears
So that they may not run down.
Petrified, like two frightened suns,
Against a bleak brown colour.

Bird

O bird!
You are my memory's captive
Maybe the deer will see in you a cloud
And the skies
Will see in you
A precious stone
Poor bird!
You are my illusion
Just as I am yours
How does the tree see us?
I wonder.

Timber

He was angry
With those who spoilt his relationship with rain
Resentful
Of the hand that turned him into a bed
If verdure must be left
Let him be a window

So that he may be able to carry on with his seduction of sparrows
Or
Meet the sun
Exhibiting his nail-studded flesh.

Hassan Tilib

Illumination

Standing I was on the hand of a clock
Borrowing time from my coming days
From remnants of forgotten time
When I was a nursling.
Illuminated I was by the silt
And what shone on the bank, apart from me
Angry I was, singing
Rejecting possible compromises
Will the Nile ever quench my thirst,
I wonder?
Will the night go on
Cooking famine?

Baha Jaheen

Black Banner

Every morning
He stands before the banner.
In the background is a troubled sea.
He stands on the sands with tears in his eyes:

'Long live the Arab Republic of Egypt!'
'Long live the Arab Republic of Egypt!'
'Long live the Arab Republic of Egypt!'

Ahmed Al-Shahawi

Moon Discourse

God has split the moon into two halves
One half for Him
And the other
... Where?

Cairo
14 April 1989

Death Discourse

I need nothing
To enter you
Just
Need my own death.

Cairo,1988

Perfection Discourse

Do not be straight
For the globe is circular
Triangular is your coming death
And defective is the perfection of your self
So climb.
Let love come full circle.
Begin.
Your first life was a nothingness
We shall set your feet on the road

For thine is the kingdom
Thine is the death.

Kafr el-Mayyasera
22 June 1991

Entry Discourse

'Rise up', he said
'Wide is the sea of your heart
A paradise is the dark of your soul
Its hell an overwhelming paradisical body
Enter the skies of the worlds
Time is but
A sea of blood gushing forth
With your love bleeding.
Fly
Catch the sparrows of speech
Recite the book of death
For your soul is a cloud
And earth is thirsty.

11 October 1991
Iowa, U.S.A.

Discourse of an Arab

If the sky weeps
Splashing us with water
And fire
If mountains collapse
Levelling their minarets down to ground
And winds woke up
Then went to sleep, in full array,
Indoors

You may then say:

My death has commenced.

Cairo,

27-29 September 1990

Ezzat Al-Tavri

Ascent

Come down, now,

So that we may catch up with the film.

Your Father

Is about to go to sleep.

Your mother

Is waking up now

To fondle her chicks,

Your brother

Is dating with a girl

My sister, perhaps

Come down

C

O

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D

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W

N

Ibrahim Dawud

Daily

You start the day, a stranger:
You climb the stairs alone
You drink your coffee alone
You chew your surprise alone
You complain to people of me
Then in the evening you come to me
Slapping the silence hanging between the two of us?

Out of Doors

Out of the narrow room
Is her voice
Out of the narrow room
Creatures dwell
Out of the narrow room
She is non-existent!

Mohamed Metwalli

Waiting for an Important Call

To and fro
In the dusty balcony of a dilapidated house
An old woman walks laughing
Carrying a telephone set, dead for years,
Calling an old friend
Of whose death
She has recently been apprised.

Attention

A straw chair
Drinking the light
In a moonlit corridor
Leading to the sea
A straw chair
As perforated as your hat
The hat you are ashamed to doff as a sign of respect
O polite shore guard
Your childhood is cast over there
Down the corridor!

Acknowledgement:

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Index

The Following Index includes only the names of persons referred to in the book; names of fictional characters are not therefore included – no Macbeth, Hamlet or, of course, OEDIPUS!

The transcription of Arabic names has been a problem, as no uniform system has been universally approved -- as yet. The transcription is therefoce arbitrary, and reflects the common rather than the 'correct' way of using the Roman Alphabet in writing Arabic names.

Family names are given first, with the exception of famous and fixed names (Prophet Muhammad, Ali Ibn Abi Taleb, Omar Ibn Al-Khattab, Othman Ibn Affan.. etc.); the definite article in Arabic (Al-) has been ignored in the arrangement.



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